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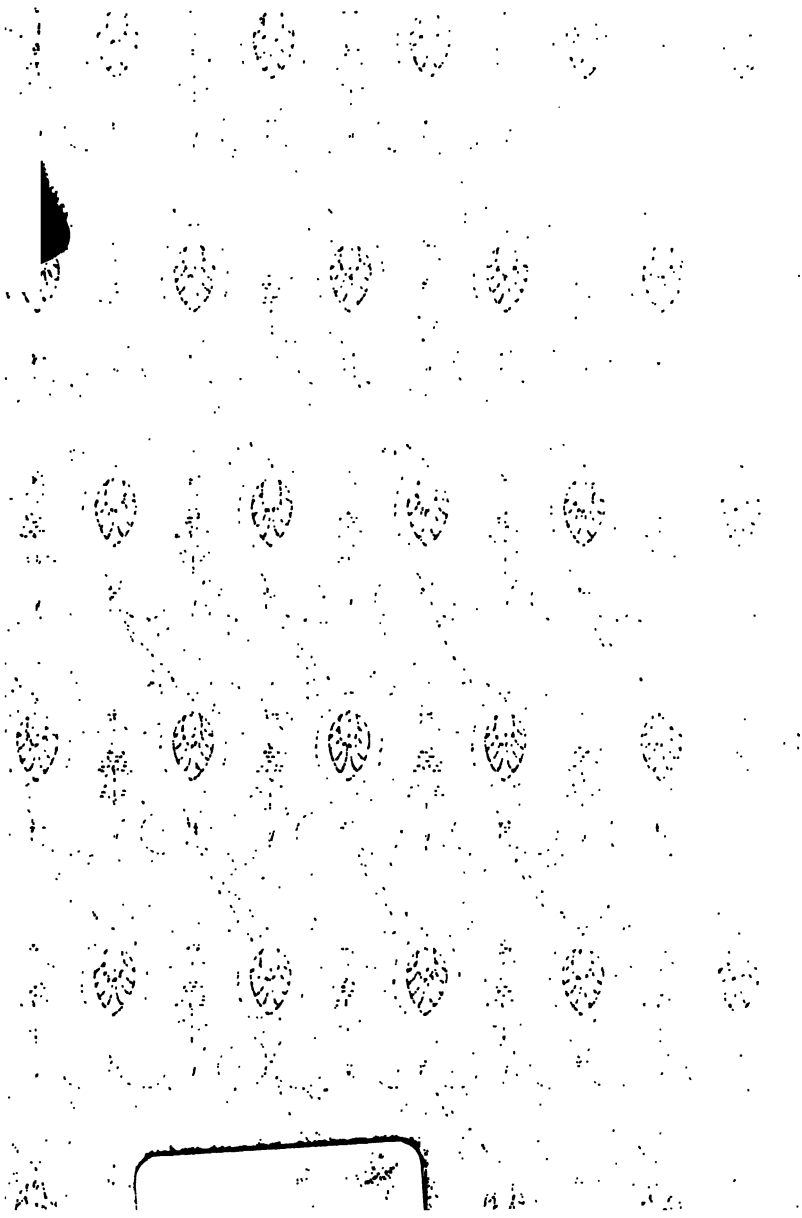
MRS RAVEN'S TEMPTATION



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MRS. RAVEN'S TEMPTATION.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"DR. HARDY'S MARRIAGE."

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. II.

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MRS. RAVEN'S TEMPTATION.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. RAVEN'S DETERMINATION.

EVELYN AGATE thoroughly enjoyed her new life at Ravenscourt. While poor Frank had been pining in the Temple, home-sick and heart-sick, she felt as if she had entered on a new and charmed existence. She did not miss the bright presence of Gertrude Agate, the devoted service of Mary Davies, or the deep, strong current of varying life which ever flowed through Gertrude's quaint parlour. Ease and luxury, pomp and

show, were more to Evelyn than truth and love.

The three, Mrs. Raven, Leonard and Evelyn, were all seated together at breakfast, each alternately giving forth those graceful little utterances which usually pass to and fro among people who live together, but who do not live in each other's lives, when Budd brought in the letters. Or rather, he brought in a letter; for the post had left but one: a somewhat rare occurrence at Ravenscourt.

This solitary letter was for Mrs. Raven herself.

A few weeks ago her face would not have brightened at sight of its superscription. For it was in Frank's handwriting. But it did so now. Yet as she read it her wan countenance flushed. It was the letter in which Frank announced his intention of going to Coltburn. So! She had driven Frank into freedom: and now, when she wished to call him back, she found he was already asserting himself in antagonism to the accustomed ways of the family! He must be gaining new

ideas and forming new associations. And thus the future would have new elements in it, quite alien from the past. Her heart rose within her with a bitter protest.

But as she read the whole, some of the bitterness died away.

"DEAR MOTHER,

"I dare say you will be surprised to hear that I am about to pay a visit to my aunt at Coltburn. My cousin Philip wishes to run home for the Michaelmas holidays, and as I am his guest just now, he is quite determined to carry me with him. I feel sure you will have no objection to the plan, since you raised none to my visiting Philip in London; and I fancy there has been no real antagonism between the Ravens and the Connells for years past, though habit and preoccupation have kept up the separation and silence. Philip always speaks with delight of his short stay at Ravenscourt during my father's lifetime.

"I hope you and Leonard are quite well. Please give my compliments to Miss Evelyn

Agate: she is, I suppose, quite settled by this time."

"It's a letter from Frank, Leonard," explained Mrs. Raven. "And where do you think he is going? He is actually going on a visit to the Connells at Coltburn—going there with Philip!"

She wished her manner to convey a little mild reprobation. Leonard was quite prepared to hear reprobation, neither limited nor mild. He had never sympathized in the alienation between the Ravens and the Connells. He shrank from all strong feeling of any kind. The Connells lived far enough away—and they were not poor relations in the objectionable sense of the phrase. A slight, easy civility towards them could not be very troublesome, as Leonard had always thought. It was quite as well, perhaps, that it should begin through Frank: it did not matter what *he* did. And the old, rude breach might thus be healed, without any other advances on the part of the Ravens.

"Going to the Connells, at Coltburn, is

he?" said Leonard aloud, after a few moments' pause. "Well, why should he not go? I have thought it was a great mistake they were not visited before."

"Ah, time changes everything; and so it is not unnatural when some of our feelings change, too," observed Mrs. Raven.

Leonard looked up. Was she uttering a reproach? He did not think so. Truly he thought, nothing was changing so much as she was herself!

"I am quite sure your father had felt reconciled to his sister for a long time before his death," said Mrs. Raven, catching at the suggestion offered in Frank's letter. "He had spoken of her to me two or three times of late, and most kindly. They had exchanged messages that time when her son Philip was here. You see she let Philip come to us; why, then, should we grudge Frank's going to her?"

"I am only too glad you see it in that light," said Leonard.

"Young Mr. Connell used to be full of stories about his pleasant visit to Ravens-

court," observed Evelyn, wishing to make herself agreeable. It was not strictly true, but he had mimicked his Aunt Raven's voice and the solemn gait of Mr. Budd, the butler.

"Ah, you knew Philip Connell in London, didn't you?" remarked Leonard, turning to her briskly. "Is he getting on well? Do you think he is forming a good connection at the Bar?"

"He is considered very clever indeed," answered Evelyn suavely. She did not add that the judges, whose verdict she thus reported, were rather young journalists and special reporters, than grave legal dignitaries.

"I should like to see her," said Mrs. Raven, speaking of the minister's wife. "She is your aunt, Leonard, your father's sister, you know. You may not be aware, Miss Evelyn, that an estrangement has existed, and I have never seen Mrs. Connell since her marriage. For her own sake we could not rejoice over that event. Mr. Connell we always felt was a most worthy and talented

person, but he led her into a life of hardship, comparatively speaking, from which her friends would have liked to save her. However, things turned out, I fancy, better than might have been expected. And I believe," sighed Mrs. Raven, "they have been very happy. Yes, sometimes I have thought I should like to go to see her."

"I should think she too would be glad to see you," replied Evelyn, scenting some agreeable variety from afar.

A silence ensued. Mrs. Raven's head was bent in reflection.

"Leonard!" she exclaimed presently, looking up, "suppose I write to Mrs. Connell, and suggest a little visit to her at once? Frank will be there by Michaelmas-day: and his presence beforehand will take off the strangeness of the proposal—yes, and of my arrival there. You have been saying I need a change."

"It is not a bad idea," answered Leonard, who was beginning to assent or dissent with considerable caution, always wondering what would follow next: for he really did not feel

sure his mother's mind was not unhinged. "From the New Forest to Coltburn would be a change indeed! Not for the best, one might say—only that change of any kind, merely as change, is known to be a remedial agent."

"You have no objection, Leonard?"

"Certainly not. I hope it will do you good."

"Then I will go; and without loss of time, lest my resolution fail," decided Mrs. Raven with unwonted alacrity. "I will telegraph to Mrs. Connell, and ask her to telegraph her answer. That will show my visit to be what it is—the result of a sudden impulse, and will deprecate any formal preparation."

"It breaks the ice boldly, at any rate," answered Leonard, "and throws us all back on the old relationship. Nobody but relatives or very great friends would venture on such a thing. Do it, by all means. Shall you travel alone?"

"No, I shall ask if I may bring my friend, Miss Agate: and I am quite sure what the

answer will be," said Mrs. Raven, with the ghost of a smile. "And so Miss Evelyn, as Michaelmas-day is the day after to-morrow, and as we may start on the thirtieth—that will be next Thursday, you know—I think we may as well begin to see about making certain preparations at once."

As Mrs. Raven pushed back her own chair when she spoke these words, Evelyn understood them to mean her own dismissal from the breakfast-table, and arose and departed accordingly.

"Frank wrote a very kind letter, Leonard," said the mother, when she was left alone with her son.

"Why should he not?" returned Leonard. "Your nervousness, mother, is driving you into all sorts of fancies." But he extended his hand for the letter she held. He read it through—actually glanced over it again, and handed it back. Mrs. Raven put it into her pocket. It was the first letter from Frank which she had ever kept. All his school-boy scrawls to her had gone straight into the fire. Those to his father, she had found only last

week made into a packet, and stored in the dead squire's wardrobe.

"Have you any plans for to-day, Leonard?" she asked, presently. Her husband had arranged his plans to suit household habits, but household habits had to be constantly rearranged to suit Leonard's plans.

"I am going to Standchester."

"Shall you dine there?"

"I suppose so," he said: "but let me have a substantial supper when I return. You know my appetite is never good away from home, and never better than after a day's absence."

"Very well, Leonard. That arrangement will suit me admirably. It will give me a long day for my preparations."

"I should not think you need much preparation for going to Coltburn," remarked Leonard, with a half smile.

"One always has sundry matters to see to, even for a short absence," she answered. "I feel there is no doubt as to the way Mrs. Connell will receive the idea of my coming. I shall not telegraph till Michaelmas-day. I

should like Frank to be there when the message arrives."

"Do as you think best, mother," said Leonard. And so they parted for the day.

During its earlier hours Mrs. Raven and her companion did not see much of each other. The elder lady shut herself up in her boudoir; Evelyn amused herself in her own apartment. They met for midday dinner; and at afternoon tea Mrs. Raven suggested a walk together to the village. She wanted to call at the Vicarage, to leave a request that Mr. Toynbee would send up the clothing-club account-books at an earlier date than usual, that she might go over them before she went from home. There were two or three little purchases, too, which she might make at the same time. The village shops were of the humblest description, but the Raven family had always made a point of patronizing them occasionally.

It was a glorious evening, but the sun was sinking, and there was already a fine keen edge to the air, and as they went down the

avenue Mrs. Raven remarked that the evenings were fast drawing in.

"But we shall be back before dusk," she said. "Our errands need not detain us long. And I do so enjoy a walk at this hour. I think the country looks at its best, and the breeze is so invigorating."

"Twilight rambles here must be delightful," responded Evelyn. "And, of course, one is quite safe from annoyance. The country is so different from London."

"I am not sure that it is always safer," replied Mrs. Raven. "But I think Ravenstoke is an exceptionally well-conducted place."

They turned out of the avenue into the high-road as she spoke these words, and came right in front of a tall man, with ruddy chestnut locks, a fresh complexion, and a garb between a labourer's and a gamekeeper's. He lifted his hat, and stepped into the road when he saw them.

"What a fine-looking person!" said Evelyn, as they passed on. "He might be a prince in the garb of a peasant."

Mrs. Raven shook her head. She had not forgotten the mysterious link which the burned paper had established in her mind between Evelyn Agate and Eldred Sloam. But whatever it might mean, she felt sure this girl knew less even than herself. Therefore she might say what was natural to be said under the circumstances.

"I regret to say that man is one of our few black sheep, handsome though he is. His is a sad history, Miss Evelyn, and I am sorry to say it is not wholly disconnected with the Court. It is a story I do not care to tell. My husband allowed him a cottage on the estate, and other privileges: my son Leonard feels inclined to be less generous. But I have interceded for the man—for the present, at least; and I think the future may depend on his own conduct."

"What is his name?" asked Evelyn.

"Eldred Sloam," answered Mrs. Raven, with a slight emphasis on the Christian name. If Evelyn remembered it in the Raven genealogy, its mention now, coupled with the hint she had given, might convey volumes.

"Eldred Sloam!" echoed Evelyn. "Surely I have heard Mr. Frank Raven mention that name?"

"Very likely," said Mrs. Raven. "My son could scarcely narrate any village incident without bringing it in. Eldred is a good cricketer and an excellent shot; but he is nothing of a workman, an idle labourer, and a bad moral character."

Their errand at the Vicarage detained them longer than they had expected. The Vicar was out. So were his maid-servants. And the person left in charge was a feeble old woman, too deaf and self-mistrustful to take a message, so that she insisted on leading the ladies into the drawing-room, and hobbling off in search of the housekeeper, who, she thought, was not very far off. Before she was found and brought back, more than half an hour had passed.

"We must make haste over our shopping," said Mrs. Raven.

Their next visit was to the stationer's shop, where they bought luggage-labels, and two or

three similar trifles, which Evelyn slipped into her reticule.

"Now I must go to the draper's," said Mrs. Raven. "I want some knitting wool."

"Do you get good shades here?"

"Oh dear, no: they have no stock of that kind. I want white wool, and they always keep that on hand, clean and fine."

Here there occurred another delay. The master of the shop was out, and the shop-boy, a new hand, did not know exactly where the white wool was kept. After searching for some time he found it. Mrs. Raven ordered a considerable quantity to be sent up to the Court next morning. But she wished to pay for it at once. That was impossible, however, for the boy did not know its price. So it was arranged that the bill should be sent with the parcel.

"It will be dusk before we reach the Court gates," she said to Evelyn as they left the shop.

So they walked on quickly, and were within sight of the avenue, when Mrs. Raven stopped short, with a sudden start.

"My purse!" she exclaimed. "What have I done with it?"

"Is it not in your pocket?" asked Evelyn.

"No, it isn't," she replied, and she shook her dress as she spoke. "I carried it in my hand all the time. I remember I had it after I left the Vicarage."

"Of course you had," said Evelyn; "you paid the stationer."

"I must have left it at his shop or the other," Mrs. Raven remarked, though still fumbling over her dress and pockets. "I had gold and silver in it — I don't know how much—and some memoranda besides."

"In such a place as this you are sure to recover it."

"Yes," assented Mrs. Raven: "unless I dropped it on one of the shop floors, or in the road, and somebody dishonest picks it up. It would be a great temptation to a poor person."

"I will go back for it at once," said Evelyn: "That will be best."

Mrs. Raven looked up at the fast-darken-

ing sky. "Shall you not be timid at going alone?" she said.

"Timid!" cried Evelyn, "certainly not. I shall only enjoy the adventure."

"Well, as no time should be lost—if you really don't mind going, Miss Evelyn? Then the nearest way will be through the Court grounds and out at a gate at the side. That cuts off a corner. But do you know that way? Do not take it unless you do."

"I know it perfectly well," said Evelyn. "I have been over it two or three times already. Good-bye for the present. I shall be back before you can begin to expect me."

She flew off with the light steps of strong unburdened youth. Mrs. Raven looked after her with a dim smile on her wan face. But it died suddenly. She started forward, as if to overtake the girl, but she was already out of sight. She called her, but Evelyn was out of hearing, too. Why had she changed her mind? Why did she wish her back?

Had she not sent the girl, by her own express instructions, on the very road where

the ghost was said to walk, the Warren Road?

"How foolish I am growing!" she said to herself, in severity. "Am I beginning to believe in ghosts and fortune-tellers? Still—I shall be glad to see her safely back. I do wish she had gone the other way!—and it could not have taken ten minutes longer. The Warren Road is lonely—and one cannot tell!"

She went on to the house, wandered into the drawing-room, and sat down to wait. She had sundry reasons of her own, which restrained her from sending a servant to meet Evelyn Agate.

Evelyn sped over the ground at her utmost speed. She felt rather frightened, after all. Her London-bred nerves were not accustomed to the solitude and the many slight eerie noises which accompany the nightly slumber of nature. She knew the lane down which she should strike from the Warren Road towards the village, and she was glad to know she was near it. Could the sound of her running feet have awakened some sleep-

ing creature?—or what else was it she heard, which still further quickened her movements? It was like the ghost of a whistle, a low, unearthly sound, rising she knew not whence, and seeming, to her terror, to be at her very elbow. On she ran, and, oh, how thankful was she that the lane to the village was now fairly reached! For what was this coming towards her, down the Warren Road from the opposite direction? She did not pause to look, but she saw: and in her haste, and in the dim light, the advancing figure seemed gigantic, and to come gliding forward, enveloped to its feet in a long black mantle.

Half sick with fear, she hurried on to escape as far as possible down the lane before the strange apparition should reach it. Nor did she then slacken her pace, but fled on, like one pursued.

The draper's shop was still open, but no purse had been left in it. The countrified shop-boy stared at Evelyn: struck by her breathless and terrified manner. She hastened on to the stationer's.

Better luck there. The purse had been found. The stationer had locked it up in his desk, meaning to restore it in the morning. He had gone out to a club meeting at the White Hart, his wife said, but he could be fetched at once. Evelyn made up her mind that, after all her trouble, she would not return home without it. So she took a chair and waited while the man was brought back. He was profuse in his apologies. He had done all for the best, and was shocked that the young lady should be kept out so late in consequence. Might he send his servant-girl back with her?

"No—no," Evelyn said, "the village way will be sociable enough. The Warren does seem rather wild and lonely."

"Well, yes," the man admitted, "though he knew the day when it was a favourite short cut. But it had got an ill name, somehow."

"How was that?" Evelyn inquired, with a curiosity very natural considering her recent experience.

"Well, it was hard to say," the stationer

replied. "Years ago, an old labourer, rather weak in the head at the best of times, going home after a harvest-supper, said he saw—a dead person's ghost. Since that time there have been other whispers of the same kind."

"How do they know it is a ghost? Whose ghost do they think it is?" asked Evelyn.

The stationer shook his head. "Some say one thing and some another," he remarked. "I've never seen anything; I have no occasion to go that way after dark. Of course it is all folly, but it has made the Warren very lonely after sundown. People won't walk there."

"But whose ghost do they say it is?" persisted Evelyn.

The stationer was not to be entrapped. His questioner came from the Court.

"I've not heard much about it lately," he answered evasively. "It's not the sort of talk sensible people encourage. But you'll go home by the village, ma'am? Those that hold no belief in ghosts fancy there may be queer on-goings. And won't you take our

girl for company? She's used to the walk."

Evelyn declined, and set off. Among the scattered houses of the high-road she felt safe, and dared to reflect over her adventure. What was it that she had seen? And what had others seen? "Whatever it be," was her sage conclusion, "it is popularly believed to have something to do with the Raven family. The stationer's reticence was due to the fact that I am living in it."

During Evelyn's prolonged absence Mrs. Raven had a restless time. At last she left the house, and crossed the lawn beside it, whence a field footpath led into the Warren Road. Not a sign of Evelyn. Mrs. Raven went on and on till she reached the little wicket-gate which opened upon the road itself.

Now, this field footpath ran along a high embankment, and the wicket opened on the top of half a dozen rude steps. Anybody standing there could see quite down the Warren Road, until it takes a bend near the corner, where it is cut by Ash Lane.

There was just enough of cloudy moonlight to let Mrs. Raven see that somebody was coming towards her from that direction. Of course, she thought at first that it was Evelyn. But as it drew nearer, she saw that it was a gigantic figure, draped in a heavy cloak, which on one side actually trailed on the ground. A cold horror thrilled through her, rooting her to the spot. Would the figure mount the steps? Would it essay to pass her? She could not stir. A terrible curiosity paralyzed even fear.

At some paces off the figure paused, and slightly raised its hitherto bowed head. The face was ghastly pale. Could she really see, or did she only imagine a bright red blotch beneath the right ear? Slowly the tall form lifted its arm, stretched out a clenched fist and shook it in the direction of Ravenscourt —once—twice—thrice.

Then the arm dropped, the head drooped, and the figure again moved slowly forward. It drew near the steps; it passed them, passing down the road immediately beneath the embankment where Mrs. Raven stood.

Yes! It was no fancy, she distinctly saw the red scar, the terrible red scar, which had disfigured her husband's long-dead uncle, the bad Squire Eldred.

And where was Evelyn? At that thought Mrs. Raven could have dared the Warren Road itself, even with that mysterious form lurking in the darkness! But when the sudden tension of terror relaxed, she felt herself trembling in every limb. She must go back to the Court, or she would drop where she stood, perhaps faint away, and give cause for further mystery and excitement. Her heart was beating so fast, that she had to pause several times as she retraced her steps.

Once within the cheerful glow of light from the Court windows, she did not enter the house, but lingered outside on the terrace. She had not lingered long before she heard the light step for which she was listening come crisply up the avenue.

"I have the purse!" cried Evelyn briskly. "Oh, Mrs. Raven, why have you waited outside on this chilly evening?"

Mrs. Raven did not directly answer the question. "I am so glad to see you," she said. "I am glad you came back by the high-road. I got quite nervous, thinking of you in the Warren: and I wished I had not suggested that you should go that way. Even the servants never take that road alone, it is so lonely and eerie in the Warren: I dare say you found it so?"

"I found the road there very damp and the ruts heavy," answered Evelyn, who had resolved not to speak to Mrs. Raven about her fright—first, because it might make that lady think her weakly superstitious; and second, because, probably, Mrs. Raven would not choose to be communicative on any scandal relating to the Court family.

"And you did not mind the loneliness!" said Mrs. Raven. "Well, I don't suppose one does mind loneliness, except that it makes one afraid of what may appear on the scene."

"What of harm is likely to appear in a peaceful English lane?" asked Evelyn jesuitically. "But I am so glad I got the purse!"

Surely the girl could have seen nothing! And a new and strange fear sprang up in Mrs. Raven's breast. If she had heard of another's seeing what she herself had seen that evening, she would have unhesitatingly pronounced that other to be the victim of an hallucination, produced by fear, superstition, and perhaps a guilty conscience. Could it be that such judgment would be true of herself? Yet she could not doubt her own eyes.

Oh to be away at Coltburn! among new scenes and faces, where the atmosphere would not be charged with mystery and terror.

"Why, mother!" said Leonard, as the two ladies joined him at the supper, "what have you been doing with yourself to-day? How tired and ill you look!"

"I fear Mrs. Raven has been over-fatigued," explained Evelyn.

"That easily happens now!" sighed the widow. "I do indeed feel that it is time I enjoyed a little change!"

CHAPTER II.

EVELYN'S WHIM.

THE telegram to Coltburn was sent, and a favourable and friendly answer returned in due course. Mrs. Raven seemed strangely excited. The few hours intervening before the starting-time hung heavily upon her. She talked more to Evelyn during those few hours than she had ever talked before. She even spoke of Frank, and that in a way which rather puzzled her companion. She could not have spoken very differently had Evelyn been an heiress, and she an anxious mother, seeking to commend her son to favourable notice. Evelyn felt flattered, but, to own the truth, a little suspicious. She had none of the rash

confidence of youth. Satan would not have disguised himself as an angel of light to deceive her: for she would but have suspected him the more. Mrs. Raven's sudden kindliness made her feel upon her guard.

Leonard did not accompany them to the railway station, but he paid them, what was for him, the unusual attention of leaving his study-chair and following them to the hall-door. He stood there, watching them drive off. He felt anxious about his mother: little matters seemed, nowadays, to stir her deeply.

"What makes her so excited now?" he mused. "Is she going really to see my aunt Connell, or my brother Frank? And what made her determine to go off in this desperate hurry? I can only think of one explanation," he added inwardly, his face breaking into a saturnine smile, "and that is, that Mrs. Connell has daughters growing up! I don't remember my mother's general opinion on intermarriage between relations—but if it's intermarriage with the Connell family, I think I can imagine it!"

Mrs. Connell down at Coltburn did not feel quite satisfied with herself. Despite the cordiality with which she consented to her sister-in-law's coming, she was of too honest a nature to deny that there was bitterness in her heart. It seemed hard to find the olive branch of peace extended to her directly her brother was gone. It was his alienation alone which had really hurt her, and now, in this world, she could never be reconciled to him! If only her sister-in-law had been a little earlier in bringing about harmony, then, when death had entered the circle, Mrs. Connell felt she could have regarded and cherished her as a sacred charge. But now the dead stood between them. To complete the treaty of peace one voice was wanting, which could not answer to any call.

She fancied, too, that her husband might think this movement on Mrs. Raven's part proved that she had had no share in, perhaps no sympathy with, the long alienation of the past. Mrs. Connell knew better. She had known Mrs. Raven when they were both

girls at school: she could easily conjure up the pale, serene child of those old days, who never did anything wrong, never disobeyed or flew in a passion, or disturbed the even tenour of life by any of the vagaries of love or hate; but who always got her own way, so quietly and gently, that anybody inclined to discuss the matter seemed at a hopeless disadvantage.

Mrs. Connell had ever been sure that the family separation would not have continued if Mrs. Raven's cool hand had not been kept on the door of her husband's heart. The late squire was not a man of stable purpose in either good or evil. She had tried to rejoice when he married Lydia Burke, feeling that her stern, cold character might supply what his lacked. There had always seemed reasons for accepting Lydia Burke—as a good girl, as a good woman. As a child, poor Mrs. Connell had always felt naughty for not liking her; as a woman, she had felt unjust, and now she felt unchristian.

"Is she jealous of Frank's being here?" she had said to her husband when Mrs.

Raven's telegram arrived, though she reproached herself for the insinuation.

"My dear!" remonstrated the good minister, "the thought is quite unworthy of you. Is it likely the lad would have visited us, if he had not known already that his mother's heart had turned our way?"

"Some fiend seems stirring up all the evil in me," sighed poor Mrs. Connell. "I suppose it's best to know it's there, as it is there. It will keep me humble at any rate."

But she was a frank woman, who had few feelings she wished to hide, and so she was not good in the art of concealing. Besides, she had always been accustomed to be glad to welcome guests—even utter strangers. So it seemed to her there must be something terribly wrong somewhere, now she felt no such gladness. If it was in herself, then out with it.

"It is odd, when one has been content to be apart so long, that one must come in such a hurry at last," she remarked to Philip. "And knowing that you are at home and

that Frank is here, your aunt might guess that the house is pretty full. Had she given me due notice, I might have had a new carpet for the best bedroom," she added, a glint of humour peeping through the cloud on her pleasant face. And Philip, laughing, answered in the same strain.

But the pain at Mrs. Connell's heart lay too deep and heavy to be lifted by badinage. "It is terrible to find one is not as good as one ought to be," she sighed, sitting down beside Alice Cleare in the dining-room to wait the arrival of her guests when the last preparations were complete. And the placid serenity of the young governess, and the something hidden beneath the sweet cheer of her countenance, soothed the troubled spirit of Mrs. Connell.

"But it would be worse not to find it out, wouldn't it?" asked Alice brightly.

"Well, my dear, I suppose it would," assented Mrs. Connell. "I feel as if you were one of ourselves, although you have been with us so short a time; and I dare say you have gathered that I and my sister-in-

law, Lydia—Mrs. Raven, who is coming —have not seen each other or been on friendly terms for years; not since I was married."

"Miss Connell told me about it," replied Alice softly.

"Well, my dear," Mrs. Connell went on "all of us, including myself and my husband —and he and I have often said so to each other—might have been wiser than we were in the past days, and far less hasty. But it did seem very hard when year after year went by, and my brother never forgave us. For he and I had been close friends. And now, you see, my dear, it is all ended for him. And I can't feel quite glad to see his wife without him. I almost wish she had stayed away altogether!"

"But I am sure you were delighted when young Mr. Raven came," suggested Alice.

"Ay, so I was!" and the elder lady looked at the girl with tear-moistened eyes. "That seemed different. Frank was born long after the dissension arose. And my poor brother did once invite my boy Philip to spend a few

days at Ravenscourt, which looked as if he did not want the coolness to descend to another generation. But as he and his wife always kept apart from us while he lived, why need she come now? If it was his wish not to heed us, why doesn't his wish bind her still? It seems to me, now, as if, in this too tardy reconciliation, I lose my brother more than in the silence he willed once, and never afterwards broke."

"Don't you think it is best to seek only for what is right to be done?" asked Alice timidly. "The dead have surely risen into higher light and better knowledge than ours, and therefore the more we strive to do the right, the nearer we must get to their present wishes and feelings for us here."

Mrs. Connell sat silently, with a relaxing of the hard lines which had gathered about her mouth. "That is a hopeful idea," she said, presently. "It turns the most sensitive regard for the dead into a stimulus for life, instead of a weight upon it. Thank you, my dear."

And the kind woman thought within her-

self, "This young thing must have suffered a great deal to have gained these ideas. I wonder if we leave her too lonely in her sorrows, even by our very delicacy in not mentioning them? It is odd and sad to think how little we know of the brother for whom she wears mourning. I don't know when he died, or where he died. I only know that she has no near kinsfolk in this country now."

And Alice Cleare, by her side, bent over her work, and longed to lay her head on the shoulder of this motherly woman, who had had her own temptations, her own struggle, but whose stream of life was kept pure and clear. What more might have passed between them was stopped by the sound of wheels—a carriage was drawing up at the door. The travellers had arrived.

It was Philip and Frank who had gone together to the station to meet them. And it was Frank alone who led Mrs. Raven into the dining-room, closely followed by Evelyn Agate.

Mrs. Raven took in the whole scene at a glance. It seemed to photograph itself on

her mind; never, in its smallest detail, to be forgotten. How little her sister-in-law had changed through all those years, which must have been so hard and careful! And this young girl beside her—this must be one of the daughters of the house, of whom Leonard had rightly guessed that his mother would think in connection with Frank. Mrs. Raven said something to this effect, after she had saluted Mrs. Connell.

"No, no," explained the hostess, "this is not Louisa. This young lady is Miss Cleare, my little girls' governess."

"Oh, you must pardon my mistake!" cried Mrs. Raven. But she looked again at Alice Cleare. It is hard to eradicate a first impression, however erroneous, and in her mind, most unreasonably, her idea of Frank's possible admiration for a "cousin" fastened itself at once upon the unknown girl, never before heard of.

Neither Mrs. Raven nor Evelyn found anything to complain of in the welcome they received. The Connells so abounded in hospitality, that it might fall several degrees

below its normal standard without striking people as chill or limited.

Mrs. Raven might miss nothing in Mrs. Connell's assiduous attentions when the party had re-assembled in the dining-room, to partake of a substantial meal, half tea, half dinner; but that poor lady was herself conscious of their formality and constraint, and felt quite glad when the young Italian, Marco Learli, was shown in.

"What a blessing it is to love and serve!" thought Mrs. Connell. "Even to be loved and served is nothing to it!"

Her children had not exaggerated the young foreigner's appearance of melancholy and ill-health. Percy thought he had even grown worse since his arrival at Coltburn. He was so changed that Mrs. Connell's kind heart ached for him. She asked why he had not come before—he had been in the town a day or two. But Learli said he had been busy: just now he had a good deal of foreign correspondence to attend to. And then they introduced him to the visitors.

It touched Mrs. Connell to see how he

took refuge with her, rather than with her children. For it was to her side he drew a chair, when pressed to join the meal. It never occurred to her for one instant that Louisa could be pained that he did not seek the seat by *her* side. The mother thought of the whole party as children, just as mothers are always so apt to do. It was true that Louisa was not much younger than were her other daughters when they had been sought in marriage; but then Marco was so different from the sons-in-law who had carried them off—the one a bluff and prosperous gentleman-farmer, the other a shrewd solicitor —that Mrs. Connell had never thought of him as a possible suitor. In her eyes he was but a boy, unfortunate in being exiled from his own land.

When the tea was nearly over, and the restless little ones were leaving their seats, Mrs. Connell called Evelyn to her other side, and laid out all her gentle wiles to win the two young strangers into pleasant chatter. She had not much difficulty with Evelyn. In fact, that young lady proved herself a great

acquisition at the table, where nobody at first had seemed quite to know what to say, except herself and Philip. Evelyn was in high feather. Even as Mrs. Raven's companion, she felt she might rank with Mrs. Raven's humbler relations; and, besides that, her acquaintance with Philip and Frank, especially with Philip, made it seem almost as if she were the guest of the house in her own right.

She knew more of Philip's London surroundings than did his own people, and she knew how to give forth her knowledge graciously, not sparing a little bright raillery concerning some of his manners and customs, yet always creating a favourable impression. Mr. Connell and Louisa were delighted with her, and Mrs. Connell felt that one of her *protégées* was safely launched on the social stream, leaving her more free to devote herself to the less facile young Italian.

Suddenly Evelyn glanced across, and caught his eyes fixed upon her. She had scarcely observed him before: he was boyish in appearance, and she took him for a mere

boy. Now she changed her opinion. It was evident, also, that something in herself had attracted him; and Evelyn was always open to that. So as soon as the hum of conversation went on again, supported this time by Philip Connell and Mrs. Raven, she turned to her next neighbour, Percy, and made inquiries in a whisper.

"Has your friend yonder been long in this country? Does he speak Italian?"

"He only left Italy two years ago, Miss Agate, so I conclude he does," was Percy's answer. "As we do not speak much of it ourselves, you see, we never tested him."

Evelyn bent forward and addressed the young man in Italian. She merely asked him to which of his country's beautiful cities he owed special allegiance.

He started and coloured vividly as he answered her. It was no mere boyish embarrassment: it was as the dead might leap back into life. In truth, Marco Learli seemed no longer "a mere boy" to Evelyn, but to be suddenly endowed with those ideal

attributes which painters and sculptors accord to beings of poetry or patriotism.

"I have made a great conquest," mused Evelyn Agate. "And an easy one."

"Oh, how I wish I had been able to speak Italian!" thought Louisa Connell passionately. "What pleasure those few words in his own tongue have given him!—and how kind it was of her to think of it! And with all my poor efforts to understand Italian politics and to appreciate Italian poetry through translations, I never set myself in earnest to learn the language! I wonder how long it would take me if I began now? I wonder if Miss Agate would give me a little help in it?"

Mrs. Raven did not care to move when tea was being cleared away. She felt very chilly after her journey, she said, and the dining-room was pleasantly warm. Mr. and Mrs. Connell of course remained with her. But the young people went off. They wanted the piano and the albums. Marco Learli had seemed so greatly aroused and interested since he heard his native tongue, that Mrs.

Connell felt quite at ease about him, and he followed the retiring party. Evidently he would not be dull or lonely now.

"Have you been to consult 'The Oriental Mystery' yet, Learli?" began Percy, as soon as they were in the drawing-room and out of hearing of their elders: Mr. Percy's brain being just now full of that sole topic.

Learli's face flushed again—a very different flush from the earlier one. "What will the ladies think of me, if you ask such a question?"

"The ladies would be only too glad to go themselves, if they could get a chance," returned the young man.

"Nay, you are wrong, I think, Mr. Percy," quickly spoke Alice Cleare, with gentle emphasis. "I know I should not go."

Evelyn turned and looked at her superciliously. She did not intend to be drawn into any *camaraderie* with this governess. If rank, or, let us say, social opinions, had set no distinction between them, then with the more subtlety must she herself draw every other possible line of demarcation. It would be delightful to contradict the girl at once.

"What is it?" she asked, turning from Alice to Marco and Percy; and, with pretty affectation, repeating her question in Italian.

"Nothing in the least worthy of her attention," was Marco's assurance to the young lady. But Percy was not to be silenced.

"It's a witch," he said; "a curious woman who appeared in the town a day or two ago. She will tell you your real name when she doesn't know it, and perhaps when you don't know it, and she'll tell you what kind of life you have lived, and future things that are going to happen. And, Miss Agate——" But here Mr. Percy pulled himself up, suddenly remembering what Philip had mentioned about Mrs. Raven's companion—that she was herself a foundling who did not know her true name.

Evelyn laughed softly. "Does she understand palmistry?"

"I expect she understands anything you ask her about," Percy answered, with a queer change from enthusiasm to half-heartedness, as he recalled certain words of his father's,

touching the special temptations and dangers of the nameless and forsaken.

Evelyn spoke again: "You have consulted her yourself, I gather. Do you think her clever?"

"It was all very strange: yes, quite odd and unaccountable," he replied. He did not like to go straight back from his own words, or he would have liked to say that nevertheless there was not much in the revelations he had received. Alice Cleare, half laughing, spoke:

"Mr. Percy heard his own name and that visitors were coming here."

Evelyn looked at her again, superciliously. "How I should like to go to this strange woman!" she said. "Should not you, Miss Connell? I don't see why gentlemen should keep all these investigations to themselves. They are much more easily deceived than we are likely to be—especially by a witch!"

"Possibly a wizard would have more power over you ladies," laughed Philip. "As for us, to be bewitched is sometimes our highest ambition."

"Be serious, please," said Evelyn; "I am. Miss Connell, will you come?"

Louisa hardly knew what to answer. "I fear my father would not approve of it," she said, with hesitation. "I should like to go—like it of all things—but——"

"But if you could have had such an opportunity when away from home, as I am," put in Evelyn, "would you then have thought it necessary to ask permission before availing yourself of the chance?"

The question sounded innocent enough. Perhaps only Philip and Alice saw its drift. To wit: that a licence that might be almost accidentally taken under one set of circumstances might surely be taken under another.

"I don't know—that might be a little different," faltered Louisa, who in truth was feverishly longing for the expedition.

Philip came to the rescue.

"I shall be most happy to accompany you, Miss Agate," he said. "I intended to go on my own account."

"Oh, but of course I shall not go unless

Miss Connell goes," returned Evelyn. "What is not proper for her, cannot be proper for me." She did not disguise her tone of disappointment. She fully intended, *coûte qui coûte*, to go to the fortune-teller herself—the woman might have magic powers and be able to enlighten her on things that she longed to know. But how could she go decently without the countenance of the daughter of the house?—Mrs. Raven might take umbrage at it. "I hope you *will* go, Miss Connell. To oblige me."

"Do you think I might venture?" Louisa pleaded, looking at her brother. Could she ask Evelyn for help in learning Italian if she disregarded this request? Louisa asked herself.

"I will escort you both, if that may take the gloss off the offence," said Philip. "Under those circumstances, if it were found out, I think it would be forgiven; you could lay the blame on me."

Philip expected to get far more fun out of Evelyn there than out of the witch, and he did not see much harm in taking Louisa.

"Oh, don't go!" cried Alice Cleare and Marco Learli, both in one breath.

"And why not, pray?" asked Evelyn.

Her tone was mocking, but her smile was sweet—the one was for Alice, the other was turned on Marco.

The young Italian waved his hand deprecatingly.

"Why try to peep between the pages of Fate?" he murmured. "What is to be, will be. And the good cannot tarry beyond its appointed hour, and the evil will come too soon."

"Then you believe such people as this woman may have genuine occult power of some sort?" exclaimed Evelyn. "You make me only the more curious to see her! Forgive me, Signor, but I am very ignorant of these matters. You must know more, or you would not believe so much. I want to be initiated too; help me, and then I shall probably agree with you."

"Alice Cleare is altogether incredulous," remarked Louisa, whose timid opposition was dying down into an easy assent. "And so of

course am I—or I certainly would not go. I should not like to tamper with the unknown and mysterious—let alone what papa might say."

"Then, again, don't go, for that you are certainly doing," pleaded Alice. "If there exist any facts of this sort beyond our present understanding, then wilful trifling with them is like playing with drugs whose very atmosphere may be deadly. If this woman is self-deceived, you are but increasing a melancholy delusion; and if she is, as you seem to think, a conscious impostor, you will be venturing within the influence of an evil and dangerous nature."

"Oh, Miss Cleare, say more!—though if they will not heed you, they will not listen to me!" cried young Learli with a strange intensity.

"Dear me! It is quite delightful to do wrong; it seems to make one so interesting to onlookers!" smiled Evelyn. "Why need Mr. Learli care what we do, Miss Connell, you or I?"

A pang shot through Louisa's heart. It

was true. How should a stranger see trace of any special attachment between Learli and herself? It had not been so at Sandgate, when friends and acquaintances, not being so blind and deaf as dear Mrs. Connell, had not chosen to be dumb either.

"Why, indeed?" she responded, with a rather sickly smile.

"Let us pay the visit as soon as possible," said Evelyn eagerly. "Can it be after breakfast to-morrow? Then no gossip about us can have reached the woman, especially about me. Nobody in Coltburn knows anything of me, except your elder brother. If the witch is too clever," she added, turning to Philip, "I shall accuse you of being in league with her."

"With all my heart," laughed Philip. "And what are you thinking about all this time?" added the young barrister, turning suddenly on his silent cousin Frank.

Frank started and reddened.

"I am thinking of nothing," he said. "Nothing in particular."

What had he been thinking? He could

scarcely tell that himself. Chiefly, perhaps, of Alice Cleare!

Presently, when he and Alice were talking together aside of their first strange meeting, the mention of the strange figure she had seen in the Raven lanes that same night somehow came up.

"Have you found out what it was?" she asked him.

"No," said Frank. "But I have been away from Ravenscourt ever since. You are quite sure it was real?"

Alice laughed.

"How can I tell? I suppose I ought to be sure of it. I own I was sadly frightened. It was the strangest figure possible, and I am sure I should know it again anywhere. It was pure fear of it which gave me the courage to speak to you."

"Then Heaven bless that wandering soul, be it in the body or out of it!" said Frank earnestly, in the moment's impulse.

He thought they were quite away from the others, and started to find Marco Learli at his elbow.

CHAPTER III.

THE SIGN IN THE WINDOW.

WHEN Louisa Connell woke up the morning following the arrival of the visitors at her father's house, the first thought which flashed upon her was that she had partly agreed to go with Miss Evelyn Agate to consult "The Oriental Mystery."

Louisa still shrank from the expedition, in spite of the inclination that drew her towards it. She did not want to deceive her parents, she did not want to act contrary to Marco Learli's wish; but then she desired to propitiate Evelyn, rather than to offend her, and she herself ardently desired to go. Her parents? Well—as for her parents—she

thought she would tell them herself when the adventure was over. Philip would make peace for her. She knew Mrs. Connell could not bear to blame her boys during their brief visits at home. As for Miss Cleare, Louisa decided that she always had a strange way of looking at matters: as if everything must be right or wrong. Would Miss Cleare keep the secret of the clandestine visit? Louisa feared not. Miss Cleare must be put off the track, and kept in the dark.

"I'm glad it is a fine morning!" exclaimed Louisa, as she saluted her, when they met. "Some of us must seize the opportunity of taking Miss Agate to the Cave."

This was a locality connected with a legend which Philip had told to Frank and Marco during their journey to Coltburn—the legend of Mary and Stephen, the lovers of Detting: one of whom was simple and the other wicked, and so disaster supervened.

Alice looked up brightly. "Then you have given up that woman!" she said. "I am so glad!"

"I don't suppose anybody will say another

word on that subject," returned Louisa, rather shortly. "I'm sure I shall not. I hope no one else will."

Alice thought Miss Connell had been hurt by the little sympathy she had shown with the matter the evening before. But she said nothing, knowing that all wounds heal quicker if not tampered with.

At breakfast, Louisa suggested the visit to the Cave. Philip took up the proposal eagerly, and Evelyn, looking from one to the other, professed her entire delight in falling in with any plan they had formed. provided it was not troublesome to themselves.

"Rather a bright idea, that of yours, Louisa," remarked Philip, later, drawing the two girls for a minute into an adjoining room. "Had we gone out vaguely 'for a walk,' that good little governess of ours might have looked so conscious as to be asked what the trouble was, and while her conscience would have bade her tell the truth, her kindliness would have made it hard to do so. We have no right to give our uncanny secrets to

other people to keep. Let us do our own deceits."

Louisa started. Though passing somewhat out of the track of filial duty, she had scarcely seen what must come of going adrift.

People never drift upwards! In a downward course, we ever seem to be crying "Too late!" and only as we leave our "too lates" behind us do we see that each of them might have been "just in time."

"I do mean to go to the Cave," she answered, colouring.

"Of course, we all do: only we mean to go somewhere else also," observed Evelyn, with a light laugh.

"There won't be much time, then," suggested Philip. "Mother has been too often to the Cave, not to know how long it takes to get there and to explore its beauties. I don't mean that she is likely to watch us to see whether we are out of her sight half an hour longer than might be expected," he added, detecting a look that was very like a

sneer passing across Evelyn's face, and resenting it; "but in her kindly, innocent way, she'll ask us where we have been and all sorts of things."

"Can't we get the witch herself to the Cave?" cried Evelyn, throwing up her hands in an ecstasy of delight at the bright idea. "Can't we send her word that a party of three wish to consult her there if she will meet them at the time appointed? Then all you say will be strictly true, you know," turning to Louisa, "as you seem so anxious that it should be."

She could not keep the tone of the last words quite free from mockery. Evelyn herself had no conscience, and despised those who had one, and did not obey it. She might dislike Alice Cleare, but she despised Louisa Connell.

"A capital plan, if it can be done," acquiesced Louisa. "The woman could not have the least suspicion as to who we are—she won't even know that we are Coltburn people."

"I'll write the note," Evelyn went on

eagerly. "Nobody here knows my handwriting. But who is to take it?"

"I," said Philip. Evelyn reflected. She was far-seeing.

"But look here, Mr. Philip, shall you take the letter in? Because, in that case, one need not be written—a message would do as well. And if you don't take it in, how shall we know whether she agrees to go to the Cave or not?"

Philip had not thought of this.

"You see the difficulty, do you not?"

"Yes, I see it," said Philip; "but I do not want to see *her*. Whatever she may be, wise-woman or impostor, you may be sure she is sharp, and good at that mental arithmetic known as 'putting two and two together.' It is not likely she has imparted that gift to the Daylight Villa domestic, nor is that young personage very likely to know me on her own account, yet——"

"Oh, leaving the letter is simple enough," interrupted Evelyn impatiently. "The rub is, how are we to get an answer?"

A smile, suppressed instantly, crossed

Philip Connell's lips. "Listen, Miss Agate," said he. "You have undertaken to be good enough to write this momentous epistle: how do you mean to word it?"

"Will it matter how? Perhaps you can tell me?"

"Well, you might say that a small party, about to visit the Cave at—let us say—eleven o'clock this morning, wish to meet her there. There will be nothing in that to let her guess, as Louisa says, that we are Coltburn people. And say that if she can come, she is requested to put a green book outside the red blind of her parlour window, and that will be understood as a sign of assent. If she cannot come, let her put a white paper."

"But may she not see you watching, Philip?" interrupted Louisa.

"No, my clever sister, she may not, and will not; for I can see those windows from the railway platform and the railway waiting-room, and in neither of these places can I be seen from the windows of Daylight Villa."

"I think it's a capital plan," said Evelyn,

"and I'm sure I can't think of any other. You see we not only give her no clue as to our identity, but even, in a slight, unsuspicious kind of way, we mislead her a little."

"I'm not sure that that is quite fair," hesitated Louisa: which caused the other two to laugh heartily. And she sat down to write the note.

Philip took it from her, and went out quickly, passing Frank in the hall: in truth, there was little time to lose. He did not tell Frank where he was going, nor had Frank been asked to join the party to the Cave. The tacit consent by which he had been left out, along with Alice Cleare, struck Philip as curious.

Philip was not long in reaching shabby Daylight Villa. Thrusting his missive into a grimy hand, stretched from behind the door to receive it, in answer to his knock, he started off for his coign of vantage in the railway station. So far he had succeeded beyond his hopes: he had been seen by nobody—certainly not by the owner of the

grimy hand. The morning was lovely and exhilarating—as bright and clear as a morning in smoke-canopied Coltburn could be—much more bright than Philip himself; for, now that he had fairly entered on the treason, he somehow did not like it.

Why was Frank left out? It was an accident, he supposed; and perhaps it would not have been the right thing to call him away from Mrs. Raven on the first morning of her visit. Yet Philip felt vexed on his own score, and antagonistic to Evelyn Agate. Forgetting that he had himself offered his services, he wondered why she need have chosen him as an ally. Next he began to doubt whether he had done right to sanction Louisa's tacit disobedience to what they both knew must be the will of their father and mother.

Altogether, Philip Connell, as he watched and waited, was not best pleased with himself. He half hoped the assenting sign would not appear in the dingy red-draped window.

Suddenly the dusky curtain stirred, and

a book with a green cover was thrust into the middle pane.

Philip started home at the top of his speed. It was part of the plan that they must reach the Cave before the sorceress did, that she might not see they arrived together, or from what quarter they came. Besides, the latter part of the road was straight and lonely, and it would be a ridiculous situation for them all—she and they—to be toiling along in the same direction, within each other's ken.

He found both the girls in the parlour, ready dressed and waiting for him—Louisa looking rather self-conscious and downcast, but Evelyn chatting suavely with Mrs. Connell over the legend and the natural curiosities of the Cave.

"It is delightful that we have found this pleasant way of relieving you of our tiresome presence," she said, laughing. "We know that you and dear Mrs. Raven and her son must have a vast deal to say to one another, and are longing for a quiet hour together."

Neither Mrs. Connell nor Frank responded to this pretty speech. Evelyn kissed Mrs. Connell as she passed out.

That lady's self-opinion was sinking to zero. For must it not be sheer hard-heartedness which made her give her cheek an involuntary rub after Evelyn's salute?

"To think that I should grudge a homeless girl kissing me!" she thought, silently, "a girl who has never had a mother of her own to kiss. But I don't like her; no, I do not. Why do I not? Is it because she is Mrs. Raven's companion? and that I don't like Mrs. Raven? Nonsense! it is something in the girl herself. When she is glib and forward, it offends me; and when she does what seems right and nice, I almost think I hate her."

"Is this Miss Agate a great favourite of yours, Frank?" asked Mrs. Connell, aloud.

"I do not know much of her," replied Frank. "I don't like her as I like the elder Miss Agate—the lady in whose house I met her. But then *she* is one of hundreds."

If he had not seen Alice Cleare, it is probable he would have said "of thousands."

"I am not attracted to this girl, I confess," said Mrs. Connell. "To tell the frank truth, there's something in her which repels me. But she seems to suit your mother perfectly. Mrs. Raven has been praising her to me this morning."

Meanwhile the walking-party had got far on their road. It was not a particularly attractive road, though it opened from the west end of the town, farthest from the mills and the foundries. It might once have had a gentle, pastoral beauty—the loveliness of fresh hedge-rows, fertile acres, and blooming gardens. But these mild charms yield only too readily to the inroads of smoke, brick-making, and a rough, shifting population. Here and there a heavy-eaved cottage, with a few sturdy shrubs haggardly enduring their hard conditions, remained to tell of what had been; but most of the houses were poor, small villas of the second-rate sort, inhabited by people who find a slippery ground between

the "working classes" and the "shabby genteel." Nor did beauty increase when the last dwelling was passed.

At last the group reached the moor—a wild, flat waste, on which it seemed improbable that anything so romantic as a cave could exist. The merry-makers of the past summer had left desolation behind them in the shape of some black patches of burned underwood, but there were still masses of bracken, dying down in ruddy gold. And here and there, among the bushes, might be seen a grey boulder, revealing the more picturesque possibilities of the soil. A foot-path, striking off from the high-road, led to the Cave. The moor was not so flat as it seemed in its treeless desolation; and they were presently on a slight upland, from which, looking round, they could realize their utter solitude. Not another living creature was in sight.

"We shall see this woman as she comes along," spoke Evelyn.

"Scarcely," returned Philip. "Nearer the Cave the way dips. It lies quite in a hollow.

I have sometimes thought it should be called the Burrow."

They went on again, rather silently. Louisa was neither easy nor happy; and Philip still felt out of tune. As for Evelyn, she was meditating upon the approaching business. Must these two, her companions, hear all the wise woman might say to her? She did not want that. The more she heard of what she was secretly longing for, doubtless the better food would it be for Philip's remorseless ridicule. And yet, when she was their guest—when this morning's expedition could not have been made without their help—above all, when she was by no means unwilling to hear what should be said to *them*, it would be singularly ungracious, if not impossible, to seek for herself any special secrecy. Possibly some way might be found out of the difficulty.

At last the Cave was reached. It was a dismal enough spot; quite in keeping with the dreary old story of sin and woe which had given it an individuality above that possessed by the many similar and scarcely more in-

significant natural hiding-places which might be found on that desolate heath. The ground around the Cave was trodden bare and hard, and reckless hands had been tearing at the hardy vegetation which nature had thrown over the rude lines of its arch.

"It is very like a London cellar," exclaimed matter-of-fact Philip, stooping to creep in.

The girls followed him, daintily holding up their skirts. They seemed to make quite a crowd in the little place; it was so very small.

"Not much room here for the witch," went on Philip.

"She can hold her interview with each of us separately, and the other two can wait outside," said Evelyn eagerly. If she had to sacrifice hearing the talk to Philip and Louisa, why she must. Of one thing Evelyn felt certain—that she could trust Louisa at least to tell her the whole truth. "She is just the girl that could not keep it to herself," was her disparaging reflection.

"I will not be left with the woman alone," cried out Louisa, in a panic.

Evelyn laughed. "Then I will stay with you, dear," she said: "and your brother can wait outside until you join him. *I* do not fear being left alone with her."

Philip was studying the initials with which the stony walls of the little den were covered, as well as he could see for the obscurity. "What a small sense of congruity most people seem to have," he remarked. "Fancy lovers bracketing their names in a place that bears such a tradition as this: a story of perjured love and deadly sin!"

"Oh, they don't think about that," was Evelyn's jaunty comment.

"My father has often said he wished the place could be destroyed," Philip went on, feeling an irresistible impulse to say things with which he knew Evelyn would have no sympathy. "It has no natural beauty, and it has an evil association. He really believes there might have been a perceptible difference in Coltburn if the holiday pilgrimages of its population could have been made to some great man's birthplace or some good man's

grave instead of to——this!" And he kicked the stubborn wall as if he would like to shake it to its foundation.

"Don't do that while I am inside, please," cried Evelyn.

As she spoke, the little light which penetrated to the interior was darkened; and the opening to the Cave was nearly filled up by the form of a tall woman.

"The Oriental Mystery" had arrived.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE CAVE.

"THE Oriental Mystery" had arrived. And they had not seen her until she was in their very midst; a fact for which not one of them could ever account.

Both the young ladies started, not excepting Evelyn, and Louisa turned white.

"Are you all here?" asked the new comer, in a cold, hard voice, without any attempt at greeting.

"We are, madam," assented Philip, who retained all his easy equanimity. "It is very good of you to be so obliging and so punctual."

She only acknowledged his words by

slight inclination of the head. She had moved within the arched entrance, and she halted there, standing to face them with her back to the light, so that she could see their faces fully, while her own remained in shadow.

"I am quite ready," she said. "There is no reason for any delay. People must not think I court it for any reasons of my own. The time I can spare is brief."

Louisa had laid hold of Evelyn as if for protection. In truth, she felt more agitated than the occasion called for.

"With which of us will you speak first, madam?" asked Philip, by way of commencement.

"What can that matter to me? You should have settled that among yourselves," said the woman, with some reproach in her dull, monotonous voice.

"But we want a little information," Philip said, giving to his manner that suave courteousness with which he usually stormed the hearts of elderly ladies. "Do you remain conscious while you speak with your visitors? I know some clairvoyantes do not."

"That depends entirely upon circumstances," she replied. "Sometimes I do, sometimes I do not. While my eyes are open I am conscious; when they close, my bodily sense has passed away."

"And do you speak to us of your own spontaneous will, madam? Or do you require that we put questions to you?"

"That also depends on circumstances," she repeated, with an impatient wave of her hand, as if anxious to get to business. "If there be no reason otherwise, it is best that I speak first, and that your questions follow."

The little party whispered a word or two among themselves as to who should first stand forward. The place was certainly uncomfortably full, as they had said it would be, and its atmosphere was damp and heavy. Louisa's courage was evidently ebbing fast, so they told her she had better take the first turn, Evelyn remaining with her. Then Evelyn and Philip could take their turns each alone, so that the other might keep Miss Connell company outside.

Philip went out, brushing the skirts of "the Oriental Mystery" as he passed by her; and, when outside, he felt how grateful were the fresh air and the common daylight.

He had thrown himself into the scheme for fun's sake; but, now he had entered into it, he did not find it fun at all, rather the contrary. In fact, an uncomfortable feeling lay upon Philip, which he could not at all account for. Pacing up and down outside the Cave, he wished the Sibyl would be quick over her work, and have done with it.

The Sibyl apparently intended to lose no time. At the side of the entrance a rough stone, forming a seat, projected from the wall. The woman sat down upon it at once. Her face there was in deeper shade than before, while the young ladies, facing her still, stood in the light, Louisa a little forward.

"You have a wish in your heart," she began to Louisa, not touching her hand, or going through any of the ordinary pantomime of sorcery. "You have had a happy life. I

see its line behind you, bright and clear. Is that so?"

"Oh, yes."

"But here—quite near—hardly passed—I see a seashore, and you walking on it—not alone. There has mingled with your line of life another, and that line of life looks dark and stormy. His name begins with the letter L. In his other name there is an O, but it does not begin it. Is that true?"

"It may be," faltered Louisa.

"I cannot see your future clearly," said the sorceress. "As far as it belongs to yourself only, it is calm and tranquil. There is a tie between you and somebody whom I have seen lately, I think: somebody who has had a happy life, too. I cannot distinctly remember him: it is a tie of blood."

Evelyn and Louisa exchanged a glance. They knew Percy must be meant. Louisa's excitement was visibly increasing.

"But that other life which has crossed yours —there is no calmness there! I hear a sound as of a nation shouting. I see crowds running

and seizing newspapers and eagerly reading them——"

"Are they joyous or angry crowds?" interrupted Louisa faintly.

The woman paused.

"I think they are glad," she said, and paused. "Most of the people are glad."

"But though you can see all this," observed Evelyn, taking advantage of the pause to speak, "yet you cannot say confidently that this young lady's life and that other life will mingle in the future."

The Sibyl turned her face towards the speaker. In the gloom, Evelyn could see that her eyes were firmly shut now.

"No," she answered. "You know your vision has its limits; so has mine—though it reaches farther than ordinary sight."

"Will it be well if they do mingle?" pursued Evelyn.

"Let your friend ask her questions herself," rebuked the woman sternly.

"Will it be well—well for us both?" whispered Louisa.

"Things must go very well before that life

and yours can mingle," came the chilling answer, in which Louisa fancied there lay a sound as of hope mocked at. "Do not wish for it too much. Hearts may ache in purple and ermine. Have you anything else to ask me?"

"Can you tell me something about my present life?" said Louisa. Her heart rebelled against the tone of these foreshadowings, and she would have been thankful that this strange woman should prove herself to be only an impostor, hazarding guesses.

"There are strangers about you," said the woman slowly, knitting her brows, "People are sojourning in your home who do not live there. This is but a stranger by your side now; not any old friend; you saw her for the first time but lately—a day or so ago. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"There is another, too, an elder lady. She speaks in a low, quiet voice, and there's a troubled look at times in her face and eyes. Her secrets are her own, and they are dangerous ones. Next, there is a young

an, and "—she paused here—"I see that oung man distinctly."

"Can you describe him?" asked Evelyn, ith almost feverish eagerness, willing, perhaps, to test her further.

"He is tall," she said in answer, "and his air is brown, with gold dust in it. He has lear, darkish eyes; I think they are grey. He does not speak much just now. He is sad at heart. I should like to see him, too. I could show him why he is sad, though he has never disclosed the reason to living mortal: and I could perchance show him more than that. Tell him I say this," she continued, after a moment's stillness. "Tell him to come to me."

"Does he know that we are here?" nquired Evelyn.

The woman paused again. "I think not," he answered, with considerable hesitation.

"Can you foresee whether he will come to ou, or not, if we deliver him your message?" velyn proceeded: and the woman appeared ot to like the tone—perhaps not the quesons.

"I hope he will come—for his own good," was the cold reply, and she moved her face somewhat restlessly. "No more yet. Am I now being consulted by you—or by the young lady who spoke to me first?"

"Have you quite finished?" whispered Evelyn to Louisa. "You look pale: you will be better for some fresh air."

"I should like to ask one question more," said Louisa to the fortune-teller: "it is about —that other life you speak of. Is not it, too, very sad? Could you show it, too, how to be happy?"

The woman shook her head slowly.

"Yes, it is sad now," she answered. "As to the future—— The eagle loves the storm, and the lion scents after blood: they do not care for sunshine and clover, or for what softer creatures may count as happiness: they rejoice in turbulence. Let the linnet and the lamb beware how they mate with such."

"Your face is so white, dear," urged Evelyn. "I am growing quite alarmed for you."

"It is needless," gasped Louisa; "I have finished now."

She passed out as she spoke, groping almost blindly, and nearly stumbled over a stone. Philip, outside, caught her hand; he stared at her white face.

"What, in the name of wonder, has she told you?" he asked. "You look as if the oracle had been of coffins and skulls, death-watches and midnight phantoms."

"She has told me nothing horrible," said Louisa. "And yet—there seems something in it terrible to think of! She spoke correctly of our home, and ourselves, and our guests. What can have revealed it all to her? She actually described our cousin Frank—and she wants to see him! She says she can speak to him about something which he never mentioned to anybody in the world, and that it will be for his good."

"So-ho!" whistled Philip, catching an idea, and believing he saw "method in the seer's madness." Had this innocent-looking cousin of his secrets of his own? If so, they might perhaps account for much in his

conduct which had seemed so unaccounta
In the human interest of this matter, Ph
for a moment, forgot its weird surround
But he presently wondered how, if there
such secrets, this woman could have fo
them out. Fancies chased each other rap
through his brain. Could she be an ad
turess, dodging Frank, and preying
some old peccadillo? But that sugges
had to be renounced in a moment.
coming to Coltburn had been pub
advertised in the local papers actually be
he and Frank had put in their appear
there. Louisa said a little more, which
seemed further to perplex him. But
mysteriousness of it all—that which fright
Louisa and fascinated Evelyn—only irrit
Philip.

"I would give a golden guinea not to
been mixed up in the affair," was his in
reflection. "I only encouraged it f
moment's fun; and that I might s
Mademoiselle Evelyn in a new light:
now she has put me right out of court,
I've got worse than nothing for my pains

Meanwhile, the second colloquy had commenced inside the Cave, the woman speaking first.

"Stand quite opposite me," said she, in a commanding tone. "I know what you want to ask."

Evelyn obeyed. Her eyes were growing accustomed to the dim light, and she could discern, though indefinitely, the large, strongly-marked features and bushy eyebrows of the Mystery's face.

"There is darkness," the woman began, in a slow, inert tone. "On the darkness I see some signs. I see a figure 4 and a big moon, like a harvest moon. Can you understand that?"

"I think so," said Evelyn, now involuntarily trembling. She remembered her birth-date, in the harvest month—September.

"The scene is ever shifting," the woman went on; "but in it there is always a little baby—a girl-child. Nobody cares much for it. It is never at home. It was not born in any of the places where I see it. It is—I think—yes, it is yourself."

Evelyn Agate bent forward in her eagerness.

"Where was the child born?" she asked breathlessly.

"I see a young mother on a couch watched by an elder woman," the speaker went on evenly, as if she had not noticed the interruption. "I only see the couch. The mother knows that her child is to be taken from her. But she is sleeping when it really goes. Her love goes after it. I see its line behind you. That mother and child will meet again—if they have not already met."

"Do you mean to say I have seen my own mother?" burst forth Evelyn.

"I am not sure," came the slow answer. "It may be. I only see knots on that line of love, and that means something between you and her."

"Can you see her?—What is she like?—Is she a lady?" Evelyn asked impetuously, thrown quite out of her usual composure.

"She is very pale, as I see her: I do not see her distinctly," replied the Sibyl, moving

er face in distress as if she could scarcely eep her eyelids closed. "Your childhood nd youth have not been unhappy. Strangers ave befriended you—cared for you."

"And those strangers have no idea who I am?" remarked Evelyn, in a questioning tone. For she had allowed herself at times to doubt whether Gertrude Agate's assertion of entire ignorance was quite sincere. The generosity she had shown to the nameless foundling was utterly incomprehensible to Evelyn.

"They have not the faintest idea," rapidly eplied the woman. "I see the years pass n and on," she continued. "I see you then o from that home of early adoption to a reat house: it seems to be recently. You eel quite at home there—as if you had been orn to live in such places. Perhaps that s so."

"Shall I ever have such a house for my own?" whispered Evelyn.

"Yes," said the Sibyl, with sudden energy. "Yes, if you marry one whom you have seen but lately, quite lately. A young man—tall

and fair. He is in the same house with you now. You do not think he cares for you. Perhaps he does not. But he will care. When he approaches you with attention, smile on him. If his wooing seem harsh and cold, never mind. You must marry him. He is your fate.—Be still an instant, or you will interrupt the vision.—Yes: your Fate. I see the life-line between you. If it draw closer, you have wealth, and rank, and luxury. If it does not, there is for you nothing but servitude and dependence to the end of your days."

"And for him?" murmured Evelyn, with a beating heart.

"It will not matter much to him," the other answered, coldly.

"When your eyes shall be open," whispered Evelyn, "can you read the palm of my hand?"

The woman laughed.

"I can read it with my eyes shut," she said. "It is a smooth hand without many lines. But it has one strange sign: it is the mark of an event which shall change the whole current of

your life. Beware of it. Beware of being swayed by stray impulses of your fancy. Beware of strangers."

"Can you see what that event is?"

"I cannot."

"Can you give me any test by which I may know that I can trust your wonderful power?" faltered Evelyn.

"Test!" echoed the woman, a shade of anger in her voice. "Is not my knowledge of your mysterious birth and infancy quite enough? What will satisfy you?"

"Tell me something about my old home in London," pleaded Evelyn. "Something that my own past experience can verify."

The witch pressed her left hand rapidly on her heavy eyelids, and as rapidly withdrew it.

"Eugh!" she said, with a shiver, "I see a man there who was mad once. I hear the shrieks he gave. And there was a woman who died. Nothing further of that is revealed to me—it is quite dark. You were—yes—I think I am right—you were a very young

baby at the time, but you seem not to have been yet in the house. Is that true?" she broke off. "Does that content you?"

"It is true," said Evelyn, a chill shudder creeping through her own frame. "I am satisfied that you know what you speak of—that these things have been revealed to you. But you have told me nothing about my father," she added, quite humbly.

"Not much about him is given me to tell,' quietly avowed the woman. "When I search for your father in the vision, I get confused. I see but green lanes and wide fields. An—yes—wait—there are two men following each other; one looks older than the other: and whether they are in the flesh still or no I cannot discern. The elder man wears a long cloak, and where he walks it seems always moonlight."

"Does that mean that he is dead hazarded Evelyn.

There was no reply. The woman wore an anxious look, and slightly moved from side to side as if seeking for something.

"I can do no more for you to-day," she

said, presently. "Things elude me. The vision concerning you is departing."

Evelyn, disappointed, waited a minute or two, but the mysterious woman remained perfectly still: all was evidently over.

"I will send in the gentleman now," she said, passing out of the Cave.

The brother and sister were seated side by side on a mound. Philip obeyed Evelyn's call with a grimace of contempt and distaste.

"What has she said to you?" asked Louisa eagerly, as Evelyn took Mr. Connell's vacated place.

"Oh, the ordinary farrago," returned Evelyn, with well-assumed indifference. "She has promised me a rich husband."

"But I'm sure she is not a common fortune-teller," urged Louisa; "or an impostor either. Think of the things she told me—think of the private matters she knows about!"

"Oh, she has told me some facts that I cannot understand how she became possessed of," admitted Evelyn coldly. She felt that to disclose the advice she had received,

having rapidly made up her mind to follow it, would be as bad policy as to show one's cards when playing at whist. "They were facts about my own childhood, and my home in London, Miss Louisa," she carelessly said aloud, and would have dropped the conversation. Evelyn did not know how much or how little of her history might be known to any of the Connells, Philip excepted.

"And to think," exclaimed Louisa, "of her describing Frank Raven!—and of her wanting to see him! What can it be that she has to tell him?—what is it that he knows and she knows, and that nobody else in the wide world knows?" Louisa was running on in excitement, when both the girls started up with an exclamation. Philip had emerged from the Cave, a strange smile on his face.

"I have not been so fortunate as you were, young ladies," he said, drily. "Sit still, please, and make room for me beside you. Our mysterious friend wishes us to wait here, until she has gained a fair start of us on the way back to the town. She does

not care to follow our steps, she says, lest it might be thought she took the opportunity to track out where we live, or any other information concerning us, which might tend to throw doubt on her revelations should any more of our circle choose to consult her."

"Now I should never have thought of that precaution myself," admitted poor Louisa. "Tell us what she said to you, Philip?"

"Hush! It will keep until she is fairly out of the way," he answered. Nor did their strange acquaintance try their patience long.

Almost as Philip spoke, she came out of the Cave, and passed close by them; but without a word. They sat silently watching her as she moved rapidly away. She was a sufficiently commonplace figure. Anybody, meeting her on the moor, would have set her down as a substantial tradesman's wife, or an upper servant from some of the big houses. She wore a brown stuff dress, a figured shawl, and a close bonnet with a bunch of artificial flowers. Only, her face was screened by a thick gauze veil, such as is seldom worn,

without some special infirmity or reason for secrecy.

"She is not altogether one's ideal of a witch—is she?" remarked Philip.

"And now, Philip: let us hear what she told you?" pleaded Louisa.

"She told me—nothing!" answered Philip. "She told me I did not live here—but in a great city, among books and papers. She told me that I shall never be very rich nor very poor, and that I have a few debts to the bad, which I shall discharge in good time. She told me that I was in love with somebody, whom—as it happens—I do not even like. She added that this young lady will never marry me; which I am sure is quite true, for the best of all reasons—that she will never be asked to."

Evelyn looked up. "Perhaps the grapes are sour, Mr. Connell?"—and there was a touch of acidity in her own tone and smile.

"Perhaps they are *not*," he rejoined, letting his honest eyes rest on hers for a moment. "Well, that comprises my fortune—and it is not much."

"Much! it's nothing," cried Louisa. "It seems as though she had done best with me. Her knowledge about things—about our visitors at home, was certainly remarkable."

"Daylight Villa overlooks the railway station," interposed Philip. "She may have seen our visitors arrive. It may be one of the duties of her profession to watch the trains go in and out."

"This morning, you yourself said that the platform could not be seen from the villa, Philip. And if it could, if she saw you and Frank arrive a day or two ago, and Aunt Raven and Miss Agate yesterday, how would that serve her? It would not tell her that Frank is quiet and sad, or show her the colour of his eyes; or that Mrs. Raven is pale and quiet, and goes about with a troubled look in her face, and has——"

"Has what?" cried Philip; for his sister stopped abruptly.

"'Secrets of her own, and they are dangerous ones,'" completed Louisa. "It was what the woman said, Philip. I did not

mean to repeat it, but it slipped from me."

"Better not repeat it again, then," said Philip, with a glance at Evelyn, which told he meant to include her in the warning. "Fortune-tellers keep such sayings on hand. It is their stock-in-trade."

"She connected me with Percy," went on Louisa; "as good as said I was his sister. How could she know that? She never saw me in her life before: and I'm sure she could not see much of me in the Cave, it was too dark. I could not see her a bit; I shouldn't know her face again."

"She took care to sit with her back to the light," remarked Philip. "However, there was no other seat."

"She told me the initial letters of a name——"

"Wonderful woman!" interjected the young barrister.

"I don't think you need scoff at it, Philip!" retorted his sister. "If she told you nothing about yourself, I expect it was because there's nothing to tell."

"She told you the initial letter, or letters, of the name she connected with your own, Miss Connell," put in Evelyn, with much apparent innocence. "It was——"

"Halloa! what's that?" struck in Philip. "A name connected with Louisa's. Why ever was this, the greatest wonder of all, kept so long in the background?"

"Oh, you must expect these people to talk a good bit of nonsense; you have just said so yourself, Philip," was Louisa's quiet answer, given in confusion. "It would be silly to regard all they say. The curious part is, how they manage to get hold of any facts at all."

"And what are the facts in this case?" questioned Philip of his sister, noting, with surprise, the burning blushes on her face.

"She only said that at the seaside we made a friend with an L in his name," Louisa replied, her face growing more aflame as she was obliged to answer.

"That must have been Learli! It was he you met at Sandgate."

"And as we know his deep interest in

politics," continued Louisa quickly, "i seemed very singular she should mentio shouting crowds—and heaps of newspape —and all that, in connection with Marco name."

Evelyn gave a short, light laugh. Thi was all Louisa cared to tell her brother; an she looked at Miss Agate with implorin eyes. Evelyn returned the gaze significantly and grew grave again. It might be policy t keep Miss Connell's secret—at any rate fo the present.

"It is odd," said Philip, "that neither t Percy yesterday, nor to any of us to-day did Madame la Sorcière, when boasting o her extensive acquaintance with the inmate of our house, make the least allusion t Alice Cleare."

"And did she not?" returned Evely questioningly. "I thought she might hav been the mysterious young lady whom Mr Philip Connell is to find so adamantine."

Philip fired; the natural antagonism be tween himself and this girl was cropping u He hated her satirical tone; he resented h

making believe to think he had spoken slightingly of the little governess; indeed, he disliked her bringing Alice into such a light at all. But, angry though he felt, he subdued the anger instantly, and kept his coolness.

"I have only known Miss Cleare for two or three days," he said carelessly. "An impostor, trying to make an effect, would naturally bring forward one of my older acquaintances—people met in London, for example. Still, I wonder Miss Cleare was not alluded to. Even Mrs. Raven was."

"She didn't mention the servants, either," said Evelyn pointedly. "I suppose she takes that kind of people as not counting in a house."

This exasperated Philip beyond endurance.

"Oh well—yes—ah, of course you are a visitor while you are with us—yes, to be sure," he cried, thoroughly on edge, and, for once, quite unable to hold back his retort or soften it into repartee.

"So you really think she is only an impostor?" Louisa interposed, noting, but not quite understanding, the suppressed anger

in her brother's voice, and willing to efface it. Among her younger brothers and sisters she had always been in the habit of saying she did not know who was in the right, but she did know who was making a noise; and on that individual her mild punishments would fall. "Philip, do you think we shall get Frank to visit her?"

"If you want to do that," said Philip, "you will have to tell him we have been here to-day."

"I don't see that it follows, as a matter of absolute necessity," dissented Evelyn.

"What should you think, Philip, if she could really tell him something he has never mentioned to anybody? Would you still deem her an impostor?" urged Louisa.

"I shall reserve my judgment until the case comes before me," laughed Philip, recovering his usual good humour. "And now, as that learned lady has betaken herself to a safe distance, we may as well be walking homewards." And they returned to Coltburn in scarcely broken silence, each one absorbed in private thought.

CHAPTER V.

A MIDNIGHT CRY.

WHEN the party reached home, Evelyn Agate answered all inquiries as to her enjoyment of the expedition and her interest in the Cave with great readiness and fluency. Mrs. Raven remarked mildly that "she, too, must go and see this wonderful place;" upon which Mrs. Connell said that they might take a drive there some afternoon, though really there was not much to see.

Louisa Connell envied her visitor's coolness. It did not occur to her, as it did to Philip, that a person with such perfect powers for misleading and concealing, and so ready a will to exercise them, might be a

dangerous person, never fully to be trusted. Not that Philip took a very high moral view of the matter. Evelyn was what she was, and it was her own affair.

"She has kept them all off our track this time," he thought, "and she will keep me off some other track on some future occasion."

And then he half wished that, by some turn of circumstances not quite inconsistent with what he called "honour"—such, for instance, as an apparently unguarded slip of the tongue —he could let Mrs. Raven and his parents know what had been the true motive and end of that morning's ramble, and how thoroughly this girl could hoodwink them and everybody.

Everybody? No. As he looked down the table (for they were sitting at the midday meal) he caught Alice Cleare's eye. It had a conscious light in it which revealed tales. Could Louisa have told her anything? He felt sure she would not do so. Besides, there had been no opportunity for private conversation since they returned from the moors.

"She knows as well as possible that we have interviewed the Mystery," quoth Philip to himself. "Miss Cleare must be a witch on her own account!"

He wondered whether she would ask any question or drop any hint. But she did not. She went out with her pupils in the afternoon; and later, when the tea was over, and the children were in bed, she did not, as usual, join the circle in the drawing-room. Louisa, too, withdrew to her own chamber.

The party seemed dull; conversation flagged. At length Evelyn proposed to play a duet with Philip, who was a fair musician. Perhaps she wished to conciliate one of whom she felt somewhat afraid. Philip complied with gracious suavity, and they went off to the piano at the other end of the room—which left Mr. and Mrs. Connell, Mrs. Raven and Frank together. Percy was busy at a remote table with a mechanical drawing.

"I think you are fortunate in your governess, sister," observed the lady of Ravenscourt. She often called Mrs. Connell by that title, thereby jarring that good woman's

sensibilities from head to foot. "Miss Cleare never obtrudes herself—and how fond the children seem of her! Nor does she seem to be that check on family intercourse which governesses so often are."

"That is true," answered Mrs. Connell, thankful to take up any conversation quite safe from personal feeling. "Sometimes I have thought that all the trial is not on the side of the young ladies who evoke so much general sympathy. I have known governesses who always drew apart the moment visitors arrived, thereby purposely imparting a sense of their being lonely and neglected."

"Nobody could be that, with you," said Mrs. Raven softly.

"And my wife and I have often despaired of getting a lady inmate for whom we should not have to exalt the tone of our own conversation," Mr. Connell observed, with a smile. "When Mrs. Connell was a novice, she used to be quite frightened at the learning of governesses, as set forth in some advertisements, and shrink at the thought of her own inferiority. We tried one, and found that to

be accomplished is quite different from being cultivated; that an expert parser need not be an intelligent reader; and that one may be quite fluent concerning educational systems, yet seem to think that the human mind, when fairly set to work, has little else to grind except matters of dress and etiquette. I assure you it's true."

"My spirits fairly leaped up when I got Miss Cleare's answer to my advertisement," narrated Mrs. Connell. "Everything which she honestly told as to her own disadvantages were all in her favour with me. Her father, though an Englishman, had been a professor in the poorest of Scotch universities. Her mother had been dead four or five years, and since then she had kept his house and taught her own two little sisters. They had somehow lost their very small private fortune; but, by a great effort—I almost think with borrowed money—the only son was sent to Cambridge. Had he been able to complete his studies there, the family, it was hoped, might regain its lost prospects. But the professor himself died suddenly; and when

the debts were paid there was scarcely a pe
left for the children. So the young man
to leave college and take a situation as u
in a boys' school."

"And then she came straight to yo
said Mrs. Raven.

Mrs. Connell shook her head.

"No," she answered. "She, too, g
situation in a boarding-school, where her l
sisters could be with her—her services el
out the cost of their maintenance. And t
they both died——"

"Oh, how sad!" sighed Mrs. Ra
"*Both* the children?"

"Alice says the one little sister pined a
after her parents, and the other died ir
epidemic which carried off the govern
own daughter. She stayed in the schoo
it was given up. That was when she c
to me."

"Well," said Mrs. Raven, "it is to be h
her brother will prosper in the world,
that life will so grow brighter for her. Thc
I am sure she is happy here—as she o
to be."

"But her brother is dead, is he not?" spoke Frank, his voice low.

"Yes, I was about to say so," Mrs. Connell replied. "I happened to make some remark about him when she first came here, and she answered, very quietly, that he also was with God. I can't think why she had not mentioned that in her letters before she came. Hearing it thus, it so shocked me, that I could not say another word. And I fancied she must deem me cold and unkind."

"But—I don't think he was dead then—when she corresponded with you," hesitated Frank. "You have heard, Aunt Connell, how I met her, not knowing who she was, when she had lost her way that night at Ravenstoke."

"To be sure I have, Frank. She told us all about that directly she heard you were our relative."

"*I* have not heard of this," struck in Mrs. Raven.

Her tone was acid. For a moment she was her old, cold, arrogant self; and Frank could fancy he was back in the Raven house

ten years ago, arrested for some childi misdemeanour, and already prejudged an condemned.

"It was nothing, mother; it was quite chance," he began, but Mrs. Raven interrupte him.

"*What* was a chance? Be so good as t explain it to me." And Frank explaine with a burning face.

"It was on my last night at home: I dinec if you remember, with Mr. Toynbee. Afte leaving him I took a moonlight saunte through the lanes: it was a very brigh night. Suddenly I met a young lady, wh stopped to accost me—and I saw it was th same young lady I had seen earlier in th day in the road, not far from the Whit Hart. She asked me the way to the inn——"

"*When* did she ask you?—which time?— be clear if you can, Frank," put in his mother.

"Oh, at night. I had only passed he in the day-time. She said she had been t Gerstowe, was later than she had thought t

be, and had lost the path through being frightened by something: and so, I—I showed her the way to the White Hart. It was safer to do that than to direct her in that maze of green hedges. Besides, it was my own way home," concluded Frank, as if the matter required excuse, and in a sort of desperate haste to get it over, for the two players, having ceased their music, were turning round to listen now.

"Oh, certainly you would not have done so had it been in a contrary direction," said the Rev. Mr. Connell, with a good-humoured laugh. "We quite understand that, Frank. Well?"

"Well, of course, I did not know her name then," Frank resumed. "I only heard that when I saw her here the other day. But she told me that evening she had to make her way on the morrow to a situation in the midland counties, and that her brother had just died in Gerstowe, at the school where he was tutor. She had been to see him, and had been with him at the last."

"Dear, dear, what a terrible ordeal she put

herself through," cried Mrs. Connell, a mi[illegible] in her own kind eyes. "I can understan[illegible] why she did it, though. You remember[illegible] James, I was very urgent about her speedy[illegible] coming, and she must have felt it was not he[illegible] duty to risk the appointment."

"Do you not think she must have been[illegible] rather hard-hearted to attempt to come a[illegible] that time?" gratuitously put in Evelyn. "And[illegible] very secretive to be able to do it."

"As to that, I think we are all secretive in our own wills and ways," cried Philip, significantly, in answer. "The chief difference lies in this: do people have cause to think less of us, or more, when they find out our secrets?"

"And even that depends somewhat on the people, Philip," observed his father; "for the base will praise a man for cleverly concealing a crime, and would contemn him for not displaying a virtue."

Mrs. Connell had not spoken. Frank glanced across at her. Her head was bowed, the tears had gathered on her eyelashes. It was a pitiful tale.

Poor Alice Cleare and her brother loved each other to the end, and had not they gone together as far as they could? He had died doing his duty; she was persevering faithfully in hers.

But what of herself and her dead brother Henry?

Oh, ye who cry out in anguish that ye have been rent asunder—ye know nothing of the mute agony of a remembered voluntary parting!

Mrs. Raven, detecting nothing of what was passing in people's minds, was the next to speak.

"Frank," she said, "how had the young girl been frightened?"

"Thereby hangs a tale," said Frank, speaking lightly. "By the way, mother, I suppose you do not know of any neighbour of ours likely to wander abroad to frighten people in the moonlight——"

"Don't be silly," interrupted Mrs. Raven.

"I am not silly; I am serious. A figure so shrouded in a long dark cloak that one cannot see who or what it is; whether old or

young, man or woman, or——" Frank stopped.

"Or what?" asked the minister.

"Or ghost, I was going to say, sir, but for the presence of ladies," continued Frank, with a laugh.

Mrs. Raven had turned deadly pale. She began to cough, holding her handkerchief up to hide her face. Evelyn Agate looked at Frank, and drew in her breath.

"What a queer description, child," said Mrs. Raven, recovering herself with a nervous titter. "Ghost, indeed!—what next? Where is this apparition to be seen, pray? I suppose you mean at Raven?"

"Yes," answered Frank, unconscious that the subject held special interest for anybody present. "It was a figure like this which had frightened Miss Cleare just before she met me. And when she told me of it, I remembered that the servants always shrink from going through the warren after dusk, fearing they may meet a ghost. Perhaps you don't know much about this, mother?"

Evelyn was listening with breathless interest. Mrs. Raven concealed her agitation under a guise of severity and indifference.

"Such tales were not likely to find much encouragement from me," she said coldly.

"But it would be a curious confirmation of them, if a stranger, who knew nothing of their existence, saw something corresponding to the rumour the servants tell. Don't you perceive that, mother?"

"Weak-minded people are apt to clothe everything they cannot distinctly see with mystery," said Evelyn; "and however bright the moon was that night, moonlight is not daylight."

"Miss Cleare never hinted at its being anything supernatural," Frank retorted hotly, piqued by the girl's scoff at Alice.

"But surely you don't believe it was a ghost?" cried Mr. Connell.

"Dear me, no, sir," answered Frank, surprised by the mere question.

"The warren is certainly a lonely and dismal place," remarked Mrs. Raven; "that is the way you went back to the village on

the evening when I lost my purse, Mi = Evelyn. No harm came to you. I suppo= you saw nothing?" she added, with a force= laugh.

Evelyn lightly echoed it.

"I passed nobody all the way between th= Court gate and the village lane," she saic= keeping truth to the letter while thoroughl false to its spirit. "If any ghost passed me= it put on its invisible cap, and I hope I di= not frighten it."

"Well," said Mr. Connell, "it is quite re= freshing to think that there is still a place in England where ghosts walk. We never hea= of any about us—amid our railway station= and factories."

"Oh, we have always had them at Raven," laughed Frank: "apart from this figure—of which I have heard whispers from time to time all through my boyhood—there was the ghost that was heard to dig the child's grave in the churchyard."

"What nonsense is this?" flashed Mrs. Raven angrily.

"Did you never know of that? Oh, surely

you must, mother! It was always especially interesting to me, because it was heard on the very night I was born."

"What was heard? And who heard it?" inquired his mother. "You seem to have an extraordinary collection of legends, Frank."

"It was Budd's brother, the sexton," said Frank. "I suppose nobody ever liked to tell you the story. It ran, that he was asleep in his cottage—by the churchyard, you know—when he suddenly woke with a start and a shiver, and heard a sound as of a grave being dug, which——"

"Was surely rather familiar to his ears," interpolated Mr. Connell, with a smile.

"But which, nevertheless, made his blood run cold," Frank went on, forcibly imitating the impressive and mysterious manner of the rustic folk from whom he had got the tale.

"Did he get up and go on search?" asked Philip.

"No," said Frank; "he only awoke Mrs. Budd."

"Just like a man!" laughed Mrs. Connell.

"And I hope she had sense to tell him to go to sleep again," said her husband.

"On the contrary," Frank narrated, "the good woman instantly supplied an excuse and a possible reason for the strange sound, which she heard as well as he. 'That's a phantom grave-digger, William, and I hope we shan't have sad news from the Court to-morrow,' she said to her husband. 'I got a hint to-night there was likely to be one more of the family before morning. Heaven send that there may not, rather, be one less.' It was, I say, the night I was born."

"One can understand, then, how it was you never heard anything about this," whispered Mrs. Connell aside, to her sister-in-law.

"And what was the end of it?" asked the minister.

"The end of it was that they lay still and listened," said Frank; "and after the ghost had had time to dig a grave——"

"Of which matter the sexton, of course,

is a good judge," said Mr. Connell, with assumed gravity.

"Aye," assented Frank, "an especially good judge, as you may guess from this concluding detail, which was never omitted from the story,—that he said to his wife as the sounds ceased: 'Maria, our lady up at the Court is all right herself. It's the poor baby that's took. For that's only a child's grave that's been dug.'"

"See the beauty of having an expert for a witness!" cried Philip.

"Before breakfast, next morning," Frank went on, "the sexton went up to the Court to speak to his brother, our butler, good old Budd. He got Budd into the garden, and gave him the dreadful tidings, all downcast; when our Budd, who is a sensible man, had heard him out, he spoilt the point of his story, by telling him that the baby had come and was particularly alive and flourishing, and the mistress too. And the old sexton declares to this day, he can't make out why that phantom grave should have been dug."

"It must be hard to get a good ghost-story spoiled!" laughed the minister.

"To return to what we were talking of," said Frank: "Miss Cleare had not the faintest idea that what she saw was ghostly. She thought it only some person prowling mysteriously, for no good end. Her account of it was distinct enough. It had passed her in a narrow lane, between a stile and a round shed—which must have been Ash Lane. That which leads to Eldred Sloam's cottage, you know, mother."

At sound of that name, Mrs. Raven remembered her own intervention in that man's favour, and the mysterious reason she had for it, and all that happened since. As she sat there, still and stately, she trembled in spite of herself.

"Eldred Sloam!" exclaimed Evelyn, who had been listening with deep attention, "Eldred Sloam! where have I heard that name? Oh yes: it was the man you and I met at the lodge-gates, Mrs. Raven, on the evening of our last walk to the village. And I remembered then that I had heard

you, Mr.. Frank, speak of him once at Aunt Gertrude's."

"Frank could not tell you much good about Eldred Sloam!" exclaimed Mrs. Raven, frigid of manner, though her heart beat fast.

"I had remarked to him that Davies had given a bad character to some of the Raven people and called them black sheep," continued Evelyn. "Mr. Frank replied that Eldred Sloam was the blackest he knew. Don't you recollect?" she added, rather impatiently turning to Frank, who seemed inclined to leave her to tell the story herself.

"I recollect it," put in Philip. "It was the night when Mary Davies slipped downstairs, and your Aunt Gertrude was inclined to blame you, mademoiselle, for having made her nervous."

"And pray, who is Mary Davies?" haughtily inquired Mrs. Raven. "And what was she nervous about?"

"Mary Davies," answered Evelyn, and speaking with the sweetest deference, "is a many-years' servant in my London home. A

faithful creature, I suppose, but troublesome. Because she attended upon me in my childhood, she thinks she has a right to love me as Aunt Gertrude does, and would have much liked to keep me at home for ever and a day. Stupid old thing!"

"And this Mary Davies, what can she know of Ravenstoke?" demanded Mrs. Raven again. The room seemed moving round her, but with a supreme effort she kept her presence of mind, feeling she might be within reach of some clue to the matters which seemed to be ever eluding her.

"Simply nothing, madam," answered Evelyn. "When a girl, she had lived in some village a few miles from it, and had visited Ravenstoke on one or two festive occasions of that period."

"Everybody one hears of seems to have visited Ravenstoke, or to know something about it," said Mrs. Raven acidly. "I had no idea that such a tide of life could flow from so obscure a place."

"Ah, that's one of the mysteries of nature," observed Philip. "If I went and pitched my

tent in the middle of the Great Desert, I should expect a Coltburn man to call on me next morning. I've often felt as if there must be a law of gravitation among ourselves, as well as in the spheres, which holds us in a certain orbit."

"Which means simply that no man can escape from himself and his past," suggested his father. "The paths of life are less diverged than we are apt to think them, Philip, and ourselves less free. Yes, I suppose it is about time to say good-night," he added, as Mrs. Raven rose, looking very weary.

"I am tired," she confessed. "Miss Agate, my dear, will you kindly look in my room as you go up, and see that things are put as I like them?"

"We all seem fairly tired out," cried Philip, as he shook hands with the young lady, "and I shall be glad to escape to the land of dreams. May yours be sweet, Miss Evelyn! I hope you won't be haunted by any ghosts from the Cave!"

"I don't believe in ghosts," retorted Evelyn, with a fine scorn. "I leave that to Miss

Cleare. You were not *with* her when she saw this wonderful figure, were you, Mr. Raven?"

"No," said Frank briefly.

"Ah," nodded Evelyn. "I remember, Mr. Philip, that she did not contradict you when you said she believed in the ghosts that two people did not see at the same time. That is a convenient sort of ghost to imagine —or invent! Good-night."

As Evelyn closed the door, she left a silence behind her. Mrs. Connell was the first to break it.

"I do not think it need be wondered at if Alice Cleare felt a little nervous after such an evening as she had spent. She had come from her dead brother when Frank met her—"

"She didn't seem nervous at all," said Frank. "I would have trusted her opinion about anything—sad as she was."

"I think real sorrows and trials save the nerves from being shaken by fancies," observed Mr. Connell.

Mrs. Raven looked at Frank earnestly. "This story troubles me," she said, clearing

her throat. "I have heard of the foolish talk that obtains among the Ravenscourt servants concerning such a figure. When this tale reaches them, it will, of course, become a veritable ghost at once."

"Probably it was nothing more than some eccentric stranger lodging at an outlying farm-house," observed Mr. Connell. "An out-of-the-way quaint figure seen at a weird time, or under some coincident circumstance, is very apt to be drawn into the region of the supernatural."

"But still," insisted Frank, "Miss Cleare never for a moment imagined it to be a ghost; I feel quite certain of that. She only thought it to be some one, either man or woman, who might have come abroad disguised for some sinister purpose."

"Was not that an uncharitable judgment to form so hastily?" demanded Mrs. Raven. Like Evelyn, she had caught up an antipathy for this unknown girl, Alice Cleare: being, possibly, antagonistic to the girl's honest, straightforward nature.

"Not at all, mother," said Frank, rather

warmly. "But the word 'sinister' was mi not hers. None of us can help the impr sions we receive. She knew she felt frig ened: that was all."

Upon that they all separated. As N and Mrs. Connell passed the door of Al Cleare's room towards their own, a fa stream of light issuing from the keyh showed that the governess had not yet tired to rest.

Mrs. Connell paused. "I think I must in and speak a word to her," said that kinc lady. "I should like to, after what I ha heard to-night about all that happened b fore she came here."

"Do so then, Millicent," assented t minister cheerfully.

Mrs. Connell found Alice writing. T girl rose with an exclamation, and an apolo that she had not noticed the lateness of t hour. Her little pupils, who shared h room, were sleeping soundly. Alice look alarmed, and Mrs. Connell thought she mi have startled her. But the anxious lo lingered, and even deepened as the go

woman put her hand kindly on the girl's shoulder, and paused for a moment.

"What you must have borne, my dear!" she said. "Frank has been telling us of the great sorrow which had fallen upon you that past evening when he met you at Raven."

Alice gasped out, "Oh!" with a prolonged breath, and looked up. The scared expression had gone from her face. She had feared some question about the Cave expedition.

"How could you do what you did!" Mrs. Connell went on. "How brave you were! How you must have loved that brother!"

The girl was crying now.

"Oh, thank you for saying that," she said. "I always fancied if people knew, they might think quite otherwise."

"Great love and great courage go together," cried Mrs. Connell. "Only it was so terribly hard that you should not see your brother laid at rest in his grave, after you had seen him die."

"It was hard," confessed Alice quietly; "but then, many things are hard." She was thinking that it would have been harder still

to have left strangers to pay for his la
needs and his lowly grave. Performing th
duty had utterly emptied her purse. She h
not even had a coin over to buy fresh mour
ing for herself: that which had been wo
for her last sister had been made to serv
Now that she had received one instalment
salary from Mrs. Connell, she had begun t
world again. Nobody suspected all this, f
she had been silent.

Mrs. Connell asked some particulars, an
the two sat and talked long together, ur
mindful of the lapse of time. Alice told ho
good her brother had been, and how cleve
and narrated little incidents of their happ
years in the bleak North town, and ho
thoughtful and kind he had been to hi
sisters in the first days of their orphanhood
The past, which, only pondered over in utte
silence, had been growing like a strang
dream, became once more vivid and real, and
though Alice wept more than she had eve
wept in the lonely vigils sometimes kept i
her quiet room, she felt her tears were to
her like the "growing weather" of spring

It was so refreshing to pour out this confidence! In the midst of it, the staircase clock struck midnight.

Mrs. Connell started up.

"Now whatever will my husband think has become of me!"

She stole yet a moment to step softly to her children's bedside before she went away; while Alice Cleare turned to the window to take a parting look at the night.

As she opened the curtains, a silver stream of moonlight flooded the room. Mrs. Connell gently kissed her sleeping children, left them, and paused beside Alice.

The atmosphere of that neighbourhood was clearer by night than by day. The great old trees in the garden and the turf of the small lawn did not show the strangely shabby appearance which they did—to country eyes at least—by daylight. The two ladies stood, gazing out in silence.

Suddenly, something seemed to stir in the picture before them. There came a long shadow on the grass. Each felt the other give the involuntary movement of watching.

From under the great trees, out upon the little clearing of the lawn, stepped a gliding figure.

A tall figure, with some dark covering on its head, and with its body draped from shoulders to ankles in a long black cloak.

Alice Cleare clutched Mrs. Connell's arm. She felt she had seen this figure once before; and a nameless, breathless terror began to steal over her.

The apparition—if it was one—came slowly across the grass towards the house. Suddenly, it paused and raised its head as if to look at the windows; but the moon was behind it, and the face lay in deep shadow. But surely it was very white—and what was the deep red mark that showed beneath the ear? Did it see them, standing there? Somehow, indistinct as the face was, it did not seem fairly turned upon theirs. And at once it stretched forth its right arm, and held it high, and shook its clenched fist threateningly.

Suddenly the unseen eyes seemed to meet theirs. Did the figure start? Certainly, it

ırned and sped away through the shrubery.

"I have seen that before—I think I have," ;asped Alice, still clinging to Mrs. Connell, ıs they watched its retreat. "What can it ɒe ? What can it mean ?"

"But where did you see it, child ?"

"I saw that same figure—yes, I am sure it is the same—pass me in the Raven lanes on the night I met your nephew. It frightened me sadly: I don't know why: but I could not forget it. What can it mean, Mrs. Connell ?"

But while she was still whispering this, while they were yet clinging breathlessly together, and all else was hushed as death, a piercing shriek rang out from somewhere in the house!

CHAPTER VI.

PERPLEXITY.

THE cry of distress, sharp and piercing, resounding at midnight through the peaceable house of the Reverend Mr. Connell, startled its inmates to terror. In a minute all was confusion. There were sounds of shoeless feet running hurriedly across bedrooms, of doors opening, of vague questions, addressed apparently to the air.

Mrs. Connell, being up and dressed, came forth from Miss Cleare's room at once. Alice followed her, pale and uncertain. The minister, hardly awake yet and very much alarmed, was coming out of his chamber, settling himself into his old grey dressing

wn. Evelyn Agate appeared in a white apper. Mrs. Raven came behind with a ite face. The two maid-servants stood on e attic stairs, quaking and quivering.

"Where is Mrs. Connell?" called out e minister, in alarm. "What cry is at?"

"I am here, James," she answered. "I ave been sitting all the while with Miss leare, never thinking how late it was. Who as it that shrieked? What is the matter? What did they see?"

"See!" cried Mr. Connell, thinking the word a curious one to use. "Is everybody here?"

"Where is Louisa?" exclaimed the mother, missing her daughter, and hastily moving towards the door of her chamber. But Louisa's voice was instantly heard in reply:

"I am coming out as fast as I can, mamma. What is the matter?"

A similar question, with divers sounds of hasty movements, and somewhat stormy exclamations, came from the little room,

which, in the crowded state of the house, Philip and Percy were occupying together. In almost less than a minute they were on the scene. And then Frank appeared, looking not fully awake yet.

"Who screamed? Who shrieked?" were the words in everybody's mouth. Questions easier asked than answered.

"We must go through the house from top to bottom," said Mrs. Connell. She could not keep a certain uneasiness out of her tone.

"There are no burglars in it, I suppose," cried her husband hastily. "Did you hear anything—save the cry, Millicent?"

"Nothing but the cry," she replied.

"And what did you suppose there was for anybody to *see*?" pursued the minister.

"Better go through the house," she answered. "Lose no time. Any of you not well wrapped up must get a shawl," added the careful mother.

Philip turned into his room and brought out a box of matches, with which he re-lit the gas at every burner they passed.

"Let us have plenty of light on the subject, at any rate," said he.

Everything in the drawing-room lay exactly as they had left it an hour before, but the apartment had the strange ghastliness and chill common to familiar places unexpectedly entered at midnight.

"Are the outer doors fast?" asked Mrs. Connell. And Philip and Percy went together to ascertain, while she herself lifted aside the curtains and tried the bolts of the windows, which were quite secure. Half-instinctively she threw the curtains wide, as if she did not want to see more of the garden than the rest could. There it lay, empty and yellow in the moonlight. "Do you see anyone loitering there?" she asked.

"Hardly likely, mother," spoke Philip, who had just come back from looking to the doors.

"Well, Philip, somebody was in the garden at the time of the scream—or the moment before it," answered his mother.

"Eh, what's that?" cried the minister "Somebody in the garden?"

"Midnight owls who had stolen in to have a peep at the trees," lightly suggested Philip, attaching no importance to what his mother had said.

"And the scream was within the house, I am quite sure," cried Louisa.

"Stay a bit—how you children talk!" reproved their father. "The scream was in the house, that is certain. The question is, did any one of you scream?"—looking round generally.

But Mr. Connell got no assenting answer—

"Well, then," he rejoined, "if it was none of us that screamed, some one must be in the house that we know nothing of."

"Were any of you awake—besides myself and Miss Cleare?" asked Mrs. Connell, glancing around at the group. "Were you, Mrs. Raven?" she quickly continued, seeing what had escaped her notice before, that her sister-in-law had appeared in unruffled order, in the same elaborate black robe of rich silk and crape which she had worn during the evening.

"I was quite awake," replied Mrs. Raven—

ıad sat up writing a letter to Leonard. house was quite still, and I had no idea ody in it was up but myself."

rs. Raven spoke calmly, but her face was tly pale, and her hands were visibly bling.

That shriek must have startled you ›ly, I fear," said Mrs. Connell, her kind melting towards her sister-in-law as she ght of the lonely widow, sitting up at mid-, writing to her son.

Yes, it did. I—what is that?"

ıe little party started simultaneously, and nearer to one another. Some stealthy ment was taking place in the hall. It ed to be the frightened servants.

Come in, come in," called out their master. vas not either of you who screamed, I ›se?"

Law, sir, no," said the cook, "'twasn't er of us—why my heart's in my mouth ir. It was just a yell, sir."

Three screams, one fast upon the other," d the housemaid. "The last one was like the other two dying away, sir."

"We are losing time," said Philip. "We had better go through the house. "Not you, father: you stay here—to protect the ladies, you know," he added, half laughing. "Come along, Frank."

Percy followed them, and they began their search systematically, looking not only into rooms and closets and cupboards, but into coal-boxes and warming-pans. Philip was making a half joke of it.

"We shan't find anybody, Frank," said he confidentially.

"I hardly know what it is we are looking for," Frank answered. "Midnight robbers don't scream to betray their presence. I take it for granted there was a scream—and a pretty shrill one: but it could not come from them."

Philip turned to look at him.

"Did you not hear it?" he asked.

"I heard you all running about and crying out; that was what awakened me: I heard nothing more. Of course I knew something must be wrong. At first I thought the house was on fire."

"It was a mighty squeal," said Percy. "You must be a sound sleeper, Frank."

"Yes, a squeal—a scream—a shriek—a yell—three yells," nodded Philip. "We can't find anything, Frank, I tell you; but we must look everywhere, all the same."

"That, of course. What was the shriek?" debated Frank. "Who made it? One of the ladies, I shouldn't wonder."

Philip looked at him significantly.

"We are not going to have any mysterious story hanging about this house," said the young barrister. "It was an investment of my father's; and you know, as Miss Agate says, tragedy isn't good for house property. Ten years hence, if we wanted to sell it, this story of a dreadful shriek at midnight, that could not be accounted for, might rise up and lessen its value. We must sift it out, Frank."

"But if it can't be sifted?" debated Frank.

"It can. Don't tell me. A thing like that happening in a well-ordered house must have an explanation—if you can only get at

it. Perhaps one of the two girls dreamt s saw 'The Oriental Mystery,' and shrieked c in fright.—And here we are at the end of o search; this is the last room—housemai pantry, I believe they call it—and nothi has been found."

The party in the drawing-room, who h been straining their ears to follow the sou of the young men's footsteps, going to a fro and up and down, received them ba with a faint feeling of disappointment. No success did not bring reassurance. As lo as the cause of the shriek remained unknow the shriek might be heard again.

"Have you searched thoroughly?" beg the minister.

"Thoroughly," replied his son Phili "from garret to basement. There's not yard of space that we've not looked into. can answer for it, father, that no person wha ever is in the house but ourselves."

Knowing that nobody would care to go bed until the excitement should in a degre have passed off and the matter been talke over, Mrs. Connell suggested they shoul

all have some coffee, and the two servants were sent into the kitchen to blow up the fire and boil the kettle.

"That's mother all over, taking care of us all," laughed Philip. "If a ghost came in sight, mother would only order it a hot bath lest it should have taken cold in its night wanderings."

"Be serious, you young people," said their father; "you would like to turn everything into ridicule. This matter must be cleared up, if it can be. What was that you said, Millicent, about seeing somebody in the garden?"

"I had been talking with Miss Cleare, and letting the time run on unheeded, as I told you," replied Mrs. Connell. "When the clock struck twelve, I started up, saying I did not know what you would think had become of me. Miss Cleare opened the window curtains; she exclaimed what a lovely night it was, and I stood by her side for a minute, looking out. All at once, we both saw the figure of a man, coming across the lawn from the shrubs by the railings. He appeared to

be making straight for the house. Suddenly he seemed to look up—not, I think, at our window, though I can't be sure—halt for the briefest possible moment, turn back and disappear amidst the shrubs. And before he was quite out of sight we heard that startling scream."

"Well, now, mother, what was the man like?" asked Philip. "Was it anyone you knew? Should you recognise him again?"

"No," replied Mrs. Connell, "it was not anyone I knew. I might recognise the figure again, and probably should: but in calling it a man, Philip, I speak from supposition only that it was one. It was enveloped in some covering, a dark cloak, I think, from head to foot."

Frank lifted his head.

"Why," he exclaimed, "that is just the description Miss Cleare gave of the figure she saw that night in the Raven lanes!"

"And Miss Cleare thinks this is the same figure she saw then."

Mrs. Connell's words fell upon the room as an electric shock. Mrs. Raven, sitting

apart, pale and silent, lifted her face with a start, and dropped it again.

Philip was the first to find tongue.

"*No!*" he exclaimed.

"Yes, yes, Philip," said his mother. "Miss Cleare recognised the figure with a start; I could feel that, as she caught hold of me. It was the same figure which had frightened her in the Ravenstoke lanes, she whispered. The evening she met you, you know, Frank. You were talking of it in the drawing-room to-night."

Louisa caught sight of her aunt's face; and it startled her. "Dear Mrs. Raven! how pale you are! Ought you to sit up to be troubled by all this? Shall I go with you to your room?"

Louisa's words recalled Evelyn Agate to the duties of her own place. She sprang up and approached her mistress.

But Mrs. Raven put them all aside. She was usually pale, she said, with a would-be careless smile; she thought they had all been a little startled. But certainly she would not go to her room. She was far too much

interested: and she believed most people liked mysteries. And so Evelyn slipped down on the footstool beside her, and sat there, holding her hand. With her white robe relieved against Mrs. Raven's sombre gown, and Frank leaning on the back of his mother's chair, the group would have made a pretty tableau. Evelyn was aware of this. She was sure to be aware of a pretty tableau in which she played a striking part.

"Well," said Philip, "how did you recognise this figure, Miss Cleare?"

"Only by the cloak and hat," she answered. "On neither occasion have I seen anything of the face, except its whiteness. In the moonlight it looked like that of the dead. But it had a strange red mark at the side. I can't say what it is, exactly."

"I thought no face was to be seen!" exclaimed Philip.

"Yes, just a glimpse of it both times; it colour, not its features. I have never in my life seen anything so white as it looked each time in the full moonlight. It was raised for a moment to-night, just as the figure turned

and then it held out its right hand clutched, and shook it with a threatening gesture."

"And, before the figure disappeared, you and my mother heard the scream. Did you think that scream came from a man's voice or a woman's ?"

"I could not tell," replied Alice.

"Nor I," said Mrs. Connell. "It only seemed a cry of awful pain."

"Of terror and despair ; as it seemed to me," observed Alice Cleare, gently. "I am not sure but at the moment I caught up the impression that it must be a woman's voice. A man's would hardly have been so shrill."

"I have known men's voices grow shrill in terror," remarked Philip. "Aunt Raven, what did it seem like to you ?"

"It was just a cry," she answered, coughing slightly. "I got no impression concerning it."

"It was like the yell of the banshees we read about in Irish story-books," said Louisa. Her brother looked at her ; knowing about the events of yesterday, he understood why supernatural imagery came up so readily.

"It was like somebody being murdered, said Evelyn.

"I am like Mrs. Raven," observed th minister. "I was aware only of a sudde cry ringing through my doze. The questi is—whether anyone, sleeping front, saw th figure on the grass, felt alarmed at it, and gave the scream. I suppose you are sure was neither you nor Miss Cleare?"—to l wife.

"That it was not, James. I wish I co say it had been."

"Well—who else of us occupies fro rooms?"

"Mrs. Raven; Louisa; Miss Agat Philip and Percy."

"And now, who amongst you looked o to see this figure?" demanded Mr. Conn No one spoke.

"You sat at the table in the middle of t room, writing your letter—with the curtai drawn," said Mrs. Connell, turning to M Raven: whose silence assented.

"I was in bed," put in Louisa.

"So was I," added Evelyn.

"And I'm sure we were," said Percy, "and fast asleep, too."

"Ah, I see we shall have to fall back upon mother and Miss Cleare," remarked Philip, not choosing to confess to the baffled feeling that seemed to be setting in. "They do admit to have seen the mysterious visitant, and to have been alarmed at it. Can you be *quite* sure, mother, that the scream was not given by Miss Cleare or yourself? Remember, you were alarmed and off your guard: nothing could be more natural than to cry out."

"I am not a screaming woman," said Mrs. Connell, a little piqued, for she really believed Philip was putting the questions seriously. "And I am sure Miss Cleare is not, either."

"So," remarked Philip, "it seems that we are just where we were. I shall begin to think there was no cry at all. You had all of you gone up to your bedrooms nervous; that's what it was. As to the figure, we had been talking of that figure, you know. So what more easy than to have imagined you

saw it, and to have been alarmed accordingly? Nothing is so deceptive as moonlight."

"There was something to alarm us at any rate," retorted Mrs. Connell. "The man *was* in the garden—for a man I have no doubt it was. Though you seem to wish to take away our ears and our common sense, Philip, I suppose we may keep our eyes."

"Well," admitted Philip, "there's more satisfaction in having to deal with a man than a ghost, so it is well you feel no doubt upon that point, mother. I thought I heard it said to-night—by Frank, was it?—that the figure given to haunt the precincts of Ravenstoke in a dark cloak was supposed to be a ghost, and not a man. Certainly one cannot at present see what the Ravenstoke ghost should want at Coltburn——"

"Don't joke, Philip," cried Mrs. Raven, in a low, weary voice. "It is not a subject for it."

Philip was checked at once. He begged Mrs. Raven's pardon, and said mentally that he ought to have remembered she was pre-

sent. "But I wonder," he added to himself, as an after-thought, "what it is in this business that is especially scaring her. She looks as white as the ghost could look; and so she did when they were talking in the drawing-room to-night of the figure that walks in the Haven lanes."

The coffee which had been ordered now came in—perhaps to some of them as a welcome interruption. As Mr. Connell slowly stirred that in his cup round and round to cool it—for to drink hot tea or coffee always made his voice hoarse—he began turning about in his mind how he could best set about the solving of this mystery.

"We are all naturally incredulous of anybody's seeing or hearing more than we do ourselves," remarked Philip calmly. "And as the rest of us did not see this phenomenon on the shadowy lawn, only the mother and Miss Cleare—why, there it is."

He was crossing the room as he spoke, after putting down his empty coffee-cup. Mr. Connell pinned him by the arm.

"Philip," he said, in a low, grave tone,

"what reason have you for persisting in this semi-satire? Have any of you young men been playing a joke, by giving vent to the cry yourselves?"

"No, father," earnestly spoke Philip, who knew he must not trifle with the minister. "We know absolutely nothing about it, any more than you know. I only thought to throw a less grave face upon it so as to re-assure the others."

The coffee had done wonders in the way of renovation, and the whole party was astir now; Mrs. Connell ironically remarking, "I'm sure nobody can be afraid to go to bed, after Philip has set our nerves so entirely at rest."

Miss Cleare was the first to go back to her own room. She said so little, that Philip wondered if she was really vexed; and he noticed his aunt watching her movements with deep interest, and an expression of countenance which he felt had some meaning beyond his understanding.

Mrs. Raven repudiated all suggestions that she might be the better for a companion in

her chamber. She did not even seem grateful for the offer, though she did not say she was not frightened, but spoke with a coldness which again recalled past years to Frank's memory. "I own I prefer to be alone."

Louisa and Evelyn decided to pass the rest of the night together. They each felt that after this midnight mystery it would be a relief to speak with somebody who had shared in the adventures of the preceding day. They went upstairs with Mrs. Raven, assuring her that in their room, next hers, they must hear every sound which could possibly reach her ears, and would respond to any call she might make.

There was a spice of scorn in the faint smile she turned upon them before she closed her door.

To her, Philip's attempted glib explanation of certain facts, known only to herself, invested those facts with their worst horror.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TWO FORTUNES.

THE two girls slept little that night. Louisa found relief from her overwrought condition in a rush of confidences, of which Evelyn was chosen to be the recipient, only because she had been the partner—indeed, the originator—of yesterday's exploit. Louisa Connell was not attracted to Evelyn: indeed, she was already beginning to feel a peculiar mistrust of her. But, then, to whom else could she speak? Not to her mother. Not to Miss Cleare. It almost frightened her to feel how this stranger suddenly stood within a circle from which her own familiar, fondly-loved parent, and a girl

whose character she had learned implicitly to trust, were shut out.

If only she could tell *them* of that clandestine expedition to the Cave! In more than one remark to Evelyn she implied this longing, though something about Evelyn made her shrink from fully expressing it. She felt that Evelyn Agate despised her already, and that she could only despise her more if she knew that she craved to reveal the secret they had agreed to keep.

In reality, Evelyn was by no means averse to its being told. She wanted the witch's message to reach Frank's ears, and if this could not be done without the others hearing the story, well, then, let them hear! She had boundless faith in her own powers of self-justification and bewitchment; she was sure that she could be very graceful in disgrace. But she was not going to encourage Louisa to make public revelations. Nobody should be able to recollect afterwards that she had stirred one finger towards bringing Frank and this strange Sybil together.

"I do wish I had not gone near that

woman," moaned Louisa on her pil
"This sort of nonsense has an effect
one's nerves, and some of the things she
to me were depressing."

"If you feel they are nonsense, it is
weak to be troubled by them," replied Ev

"You heard all she said," Louisa wen
"and how she talked about glory and na
and—that sort of thing. I don't care on
about glory, and I don't want to have
thing to do with nations! I never
cared much for history. I want a quiet
and peace and comfort."

"I should have liked a grand, rom
fortune like that," said Evelyn. "All
told me was only what might be expecte

"And yet, if she had followed our l
only," Louisa sighed, "I'm sure she ougl
have given you the heroine's part. W
ever we played at charades at school, I
always an old woman in a white cap.
crowns and coronets did not suit my s
and everybody burst out laughing if I
them on."

"But what makes you think of cro

and coronets? I didn't hear her mention them."

"No," said Louisa, "but you heard her talk about a nation shouting. If it means anything, it means that Marco Learli is somebody more than he seems. He once hinted as much to my mother."

"And has he never put any confidence in you?" asked Evelyn. "Did you not even ask him what he meant by his words to Mrs. Connell?"

Louisa's face was burning in the kindly darkness.

"He said to me the first time we met, when we were not sure ever to meet again," she whispered, "that perhaps some day I should see his name in the public papers and hear people talking about him. Those were his words; I never forgot them; for at the time he looked so sad and ill, and his eyes had such a strange, far-away expression, that I was terribly afraid he might be thinking of—of suicide."

Louisa, repeating the last word in a dread,

timid whisper, expected Evelyn to be altogether thrilled. But Evelyn laughed.

"That would not have made much sensation," she observed. "It is only what the world would think quite natural in a disappointed, home-sick foreigner. Foreigners do not regard these points as we do. But it is certainly singular when the Italian's modest words get this strange re-statement in a prophetic flourish of the witch-woman's. I wish you joy of your prince in disguise, Miss Connell."

"I don't want him to be a prince in disguise," returned Louisa.

Louisa could not rest. She could not help connecting the visit of yesterday with the terror of this night, and she trembled for what they had done.

"I think we ought to tell Frank Raven about our visit and what was said," she murmured. "You see, Miss Agate, we have begun to mix ourselves up with this woman, and there's nothing so dangerous or foolish in most things as leaving off in the middle.

We had better go through to the end, and hen be more careful in future."

"Do as you like; you are his cousin; it is or you to tell him," said Evelyn curtly, raftily suppressing her delight.

"I'll speak to Philip about it again to-norrow," said Louisa, "and hear what he ays."

Evelyn gave a smile of disdain.

"Were I as sure as you are that it ought o be done, I would not beat about the bush: would do it," she remarked.

But Louisa said no more. She felt alto-ether weak and contemptible in comparison vith this strong-minded young woman.

So Miss Evelyn Agate got leisure for uiet meditation. The figure in the garden o-night must be certainly identical with the host of Ravenscourt that walked in the noonlight—the ghost of whose baneful nfluence on the neighbourhood the Raven-toke stationer had spoken—the ghost which Alice Cleare and herself had both seen at Ravenstoke, and almost on the same spot. What could be the meaning of its appearance

at Coltburn? Had it followed any one of them? Herself?—or Mrs. Raven?—or Frank?—or even Alice Cleare? Nay, not Alice: that idea was too ridiculous!

Suddenly, all in a moment, Evelyn's heart gave a great leap. Its pulses stood still, and then bounded tumultuously onwards, at the thought, whose possible significance (strange, perhaps, to say) had never struck her before, that her own birthday and Frank's were the same! Could it be that she was the daughter of the house of Ravenscourt?—could it be *possible* that she was Mrs. Raven's child, and that this second son of the family was but a changeling, a stranger and usurper?

But the very fact of her own newly-formed intimate relation with Ravenscourt only made this idea more incredible to Evelyn. For had not those relations been formed in the most conventional manner—formed simply by her own answer to an advertisement in a public print? Evelyn's was not a mind predisposed to believe in providential coincidence, and that any design had brought about the coincidence she had no reason to believe.

Yet she harped upon this new fancy: that she might be Miss Evelyn Raven. Imagination began to flutter its wings. The witch must have indicated Frank in the persistent but indifferent lover—surely, yes! And if he became aware of his precarious position, and of how a marriage with her might assure it for ever without pain or scandal, that would both explain and justify a rather loveless suit. It was the course human nature would necessarily take, and she would certainly not blame it. But Evelyn did not allow herself to believe that these fancies were facts: she was too practical.

Stay!—There was Marco Learli again; and all the indefinite and wonderful possibilities she saw foreshadowed in *his* future. The desert of her life had suddenly broken up into enchanting prospects. Mirages they might be: but then, again, they might not. And in the meantime, though the horizon had so brightened, the ground remained as solid as ever under her feet, and she must be wary and cautious. For no vague hope of pushing her fortunes, for no wild dream, even

of empire, would she risk her present snug resting-place at Ravenscourt.

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," mused the girl, as she lay silently, quite unheeding Louisa's ill-suppressed sighs. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

She turned round and composed herself to sleep. Wakefulness destroyed good looks, and confused the brain. She did not feel excited by these imaginings. If Frank were really a changeling, who brought him to the Court, and where did he come from? Somebody must have lost him. Ha!—and she started at the sudden thought—there was the Agates' baby boy! That was lost—or stolen. Could the boy be Frank? Dear, dear! if Aunt Gertrude got a suspicion of all this, how she would work to unfathom the mystery, and not leave a stone unturned! But Aunt Gertrude's suspicions must not be roused. That might only end in unsettling Evelyn's present position, without in the least improving her future. Thus Evelyn's fancy went toying with her own life and the

lives and hearts of those who stood nearest her; but she did not find the game too exciting, for she fell asleep in the middle of it.

Next morning, she remembered her own ideas almost as if they had come to her in a dream. She was Mrs. Raven's companion; neither more nor less. Still there are some dreams which we do not readily forget.

Of course, the first topic of conversation at the breakfast-table was the alarm of the preceding night. The only one of the party who looked any the worse for the disturbance was Mrs. Raven. She owned she had never closed her eyes afterwards, but added that sleeplessness was no uncommon condition with her now. There was a fall in her voice, as she said that, which went to Frank's heart.

"Did you notice any people besides yourselves at the Cave yesterday?" suddenly asked Mrs. Connell. "Loose characters do hang about there sometimes."

Louisa's face flushed vividly. But Evelyn's

"We saw nobody except our own party. At least I did not. Did you?"—and she turned towards the two others.

Louisa bent her head to stir the sugar in her cup. Philip looked Evelyn full in the face.

"Our own party!" he repeated. "I scarcely saw even it at the Cave. There was not room for us all inside together."

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Connell. "There are many hours in a day, and I dare say most people visit that place in the afternoon. Besides, these sensational advertisements often conceal meanings quite different from what appears on their surface."

"Why, mother," exclaimed Philip, "what are you talking of? What has the Cave to do with sensational advertisements?"

"Only this, Philip: there is such an advertisement in to-day's paper, purporting to have some connection with a yesterday's visitor at the Cave."

"Dear me!" rejoined Philip, feeling rather conscious. "What may that be?"

"Nothing very interesting on the surface

of it," answered his mother, "but, as I say, the true meaning may be hidden. Listen:

"'THE CAVE: Yesterday: Is the message delivered? Beware!'"

Louisa was trembling from head to foot. She dared not lift her eyes either to Evelyn's face or Philip's. A buzzing sound rang in her ears; through which she heard Evelyn take up the conversation, in her specially quiet, deliberate manner, and speak to Philip.

"There was that woman who passed us; after we came out of the Cave. She looked like a character—as if she had a history of her own."

Louisa had to control herself during breakfast. Afterwards she drew Philip to what was called the housekeeper's room, a little place that had been her own peculiar sanctum since she took the housekeeping and other domestic duties off her mother's hands. There she gave way completely, and sobbed aloud.

"Philip, I'm frightened to death; I can't bear it any longer. And I won't have that

Miss Evelyn crowing over me, as I know she *is*. And Frank ought to get that message! It is for him to choose his own course afterwards: not for us to keep him in the dark."

Philip was thoughtful. For one thing, he could not understand his sister's panic. He knew Evelyn Agate better than Louisa did, and probably had even a lower and yet truer estimate of her worth, or worthlessness. But Philip was no sage: only a worldly-wise young man, who had his wits about him. He was quite willing that Frank should receive the message that the witch had sent. In truth his own curiosity was aroused, not only about that, but about these other curious things that were happening.

Philip wanted to know more. Three questions were lying upon his mind. To wit: Whether that woman was a mere clever impostor, scenting her track as she went, and so, like a hound, liable to be defeated by a false trail? Whether she was a dangerous adventuress, with objects of her own in view? Or, whether there lay, behind her,

any mystery passing present comprehension, and linking her and her retrospects and prophecies with the strange being his mother and Alice Cleare had seen in the garden?

"It would never do to have a town's talk made over anything connected with our sober house," mentally repeated Philip. But the pacification of Louisa was the duty of the present moment. How easily women could get flurried! Philip could not see why she should be so agitated: could not gather much reason for it from her disconnected words. The foolish girl seemed to imagine that because she had had her fortune told, she might be followed by evil and disturbing influences for the remainder of her days.

"Well, Louie," he said, aloud, "we'll tell Frank. It does not necessarily follow that papa and mamma need be told. We might even leave Miss Evelyn Agate to find out that we haven't set much store by the secret —that we would as lief tell it as not."

But Louisa still refused to be comforted.

"What a silly girl you are! I dare say Frank's visit will bring us no end of mysti-

fication and fun. Afraid of not telling mamma you say! Oh, come, it's no such great crime that we have committed. I'll take it all upon myself—there! They can't scold us much."

"I hardly know why I should feel like this, Philip."

"I'm sure I don't. I should not be surprised if the father goes to see the Oriental lady himself: in the ordinary course of ministerial duty and scientific inquiry, you know. Cheer up, child."

"Frank *must* go, Philip."

"Of course. And if he's afraid to visit the witch alone, I'll go with him," laughed Philip; "and if she won't let me in to hear her revelations, I'll wait at the door, and get them all hot when he comes out."

Louisa's frightened face settled down into a faint smile. She was reassured as easily as she was flurried. But she did not tell Philip that her chief trouble was connected with the young Italian, Marco Learli.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FOREIGN TONGUE.

FRANK RAVEN was in his own room, writing a letter to Leonard. During their brief absences from each other, the brothers had never corresponded. Frank made a mental note that this was the first letter which had ever passed between them. He would not have written now, but that he really wanted to know whether Leonard could find any clue to the identity of the figure Miss Cleare had seen in Ash Lane at Ravenscourt. Leonard was not a man to whom it would have been very easy to tell such a story, while Miss Cleare only had seen it—a strange young lady, straying alone in lonely places. But the case

was altered now; and Frank had resolved
leave no stone unturned to get at the botto
of the mystery. He had no doubt that Mı
Connell and Miss Cleare had seen a b
cloaked man in the garden; he had not
shadow of doubt, either, that Miss Cleare hı
good reason for believing that this figure w
the one she had been frightened by in tl
Raven lanes. He had as little doubt th
the shriek, or cry, which had rung throuş
the house, must have come from some oı
who had also seen this figure on the grass-plı
and been frightened by it. Could it have beı
from his mother? He had noticed that she hı
answered many of the questions suggested, on
by silence. Anyway, Frank thought it was h
duty to endeavour to unravel the problem.

Directly he appeared on the stairs—h
letter, finished, in his hand—Philip pounce
on him, and led him to the housekeepeı
room, where Louisa still lingered. They, tl
three cousins, could be tolerably secure here
an undisturbed chat. Louisa would have to
the story of their visit to the Cave, beginnir
with asseverations of her own repentance, b

Philip speedily took the narrative upon himself.

"You remember our talking over the 'Oriental Mystery,' Frank? There was enough said about it, especially by Percy. Well, do you know, old boy, after all our ridicule, some of us went to see her yesterday."

Frank laughed. He supposed they had gone in pure fun. Philip was glad of that laugh, and hastened to emphasize the mood from which it rose.

"Now, don't make sport of us, young man," he said, with mock deprecation. "You see, the girls had set their hearts on it; and so——"

Louisa could not endure this.

"I'm sure I didn't," she burst out. "Frank knows it was not my idea, to begin with; and, after thinking over it, and hearing what Marco Learli and Alice Cleare said, I would not have gone near the woman on any account, but for that Miss Evelyn Agate."

Louisa was throwing overboard all dreams of future amity with Evelyn. Something in the companion's tone, during the later confi-

dences of the past night, had produced such an impression on Miss Connell, that had Evelyn even made her a free offer of spending all the rest of her visit in teaching her that Italian language which she so much coveted, the offer would have been spurned.

"Oh, you were glad enough to go," said Philip, vexed with her that she did not take up his cue of treating the whole thing as a joke. "And quite naturally, too. You don't have too much excitement in Coltburn."

"I'm not so sure of that," smiled Frank. "My twenty years of Raven life had never introduced me to such a drama as we had here last night."

"Oh, come, come," said Philip; "it was a Raven ghost that disturbed us, at any rate. We don't keep a ghost here, Frank; we are too humble."

"Perhaps that is why you went to a witch," returned Frank.

"Just so," assented Philip. "Common folks must console themselves somehow. And even the witch wouldn't have anything to say to me!"

"No?"

"No. And the most sensible thing she said to the girls was, that she knew of *your* existence, Frank; that she wanted to see you very much; that she could speak to you concerning a secret matter, which nobody knows anything of but you and herself; imparting together, I think, a general impression that you would 'hear of something to your advantage.'"

Philip's tone and manner were light enough, but he was watching Frank narrowly. There are few men whose faces would not change a little to hear that something they believed to be a secret was open to the eyes of some unexpected and unknown person. Frank only flushed vividly. He was aware of but one secret; it was connected with Alice Cleare; and his heart had not yet whispered of it purely to himself.

"Do go," said Philip airily. "It will be fun to study the way in which the old prophetess tries to make fools of people. And Frank—did you listen to that advertise-

ment my mother read from the paper this morning?"

"Of course I did. We all listened."

"Well, look here: we believe that advertisement was intended for your eyes, and that the 'message' mentioned is the witch's wish to see you."

"What nonsense!" exclaimed Frank. "Why, that message was all about the Cave—wasn't it?"

"Well, weren't we at the Cave yesterday?" returned Philip. "I'm sure you heard *that*, old fellow. It was there we held our several interviews with the witch."

"But does she attend at the Cave?"

"No. We got her to meet us there because we did not care to go to her lodgings; don't you see?"

Frank felt surprised. "Which of you went?"

"The two girls—Louisa here and Evelyn Agate; and I escorted them." And Philip went on to speak more in detail of what happened, and reiterated the message to Frank.

"I'd go if I were you, Frank."

"*Do*," said Louisa emphatically. "The woman does know strange things, and I can't imagine how it is possible she should, unless her knowledge is supernatural."

"But that must be nonsense," laughed Frank. "And pray, Philip, where am I to see her if I do go?"

"Oh, at her house, certainly. I will go with you. To tell you the whole truth," added Philip, "though it may take down your sense of self-importance, one of us must see her again, for we all forgot to pay her. And I have a shrewd suspicion that this accounts for the special urgency of her wish to see you. I suppose a sovereign will be enough."

At that instant Mrs. Connell's voice was heard calling from the dining-room, and Louisa had to hasten away in answer to it.

Philip saw his opportunity. He gave a sideway nod towards the door as it closed behind her. "You see how upset she is," he whispered. "You must go. I suspect that the Oriental craft saw Louisa could be easily scared, and so gave her a dose of

daggers, and omens, and cross-bones. Now see here, Frank; if you go to this woman, and are able to prove her the humbug she certainly is, you will do Louisa a true service. I am afraid the belief in all this has taken serious hold upon her nerves."

"Oh, I'd like to do what I can to serve or please anybody," said Frank simply. "I can't promise not to burst out laughing in the lady's face. When are we to go?"

"Now," said Philip. "No time like the present."

As the two young men passed through the hall, they heard voices in the drawing-room, and Philip paused. For these were familiar Coltburn voices, which he had not yet heard during his present visit to his native town.

"I must go in," he whispered to Frank. "These visitors are the Misses Beck, dear old maiden ladies, great friends of my mother's. She told me they were going away on a visit, so I may not have another chance of seeing them. Will you wait for me? or try to find Daylight Villa on your own account?"

"Oh, I will wait," said Frank. "Or, stay —I can go out on an errand of my own, and look in again for you. Where shall I find a stationer's shop?"

"The shops are in quite another direction from Daylight Villa, which is by the railway station," answered Philip. "I will direct you."

He was not sorry that Frank was disposed of. He knew that the Misses Beck were great gossips, with a furtive love for the marvellous, and that they were not at all unlikely to discuss the "Oriental Mystery," and might have so prejudiced Frank against that incomprehensible potentate as to cause him to rescind his consent: and Philip estimated the Misses Beck justly. The two old ladies exclaimed their delight at seeing him, and went into a mingling of ecstasies over his splendid prospects in London and lamentations over his "London pallor," and then relapsed into their chairs and picked up the thread of their conversation where his entrance had snapped it.

"Miranda does not see things as I see

them," said the elder Miss Beck, "but I say that a woman who will take half-a-crown from such a girl as our Betsy must have the heart of a stone. A poor parish orphan, earning her bread and eight pounds a year as a domestic servant. It's shameful!"

"My dear," expostulated the calmer Miss Miranda, "if a parish orphan goes to buy anything, she has to pay for it. What would you think of any haberdasher, if, before he would sell her a ribbon (and Betsy buys too many!) he asked her, 'Are you a parish orphan, and are you sure you can afford it?' It's exactly the same thing, Esther."

"No, it is not," dissented Miss Beck, "and I'm sure Mrs. Connell must see it as I do. This woman, if she professes to know anything, ought to have known that Betsy was a parish orphan. *I* don't profess to be an Oriental Mystery, or anything out of the common, but I'm sure *I* could see 'parish orphan' stamped all over the girl in capital letters—which is a trying thing to say of one's own servant, when one can't afford to keep a better. But if it's true, it's true."

And Miss Beck sat upright and confronted the world.

"People who are heartless enough to impose on others will not pause where their cheating is likely to be a real injury," observed Mrs. Connell. "But it seems to me that the fault was the girl's own. Why did she go?"

"Ah!" groaned Miss Beck. "You can't put old heads upon young shoulders."

From these remarks, Philip gathered that Miss Beck's maid had been consulting the witch, and had not been permitted, like his party, to escape payment. He felt soothed, somehow. The woman must be but a commonplace impostor after all. Mr. Connell spoke a few words of wisdom, half jestingly.

"Now, it's a true pleasure to hear you talk, sir," exclaimed Miss Beck; "you say exactly what I wanted to say myself. If Betsy wished to know whether the grocer's young man was a fit sweetheart for her, had she not better have come to you or Mrs. Connell?—I won't say to me or Miranda,

seeing that we have no experience in such things."

At this point Philip heard somebody open the hall-door, and guessed it was Frank, returning. So he sprang up and bade the old ladies a hasty adieu, his very hurry giving his speech an enthusiasm and warmth which highly delighted them.

The young men went off together, Philip linking his arm through Frank's, in his wonted fashion. Philip poured out the story of Miss Beck's indignation, with mimicries of that lady's quaint manner, which kept Frank interested and amused till they were in front of Daylight Villa.

The windows of that mysterious abode were as usual closely screened—"as if it were afraid of its own sponsor," Philip observed. Everything about the place had the most neglected and sordid appearance. The door-ledges were dusty, the bell-handles dull and damp, the uneven doorstep bore tramplings of dirty footmarks.

"I wonder if the Delphic oracle was

always in a mess," Philip said, after he had knocked.

The door was promptly opened. Philip had brought no note with him this morning, and he found himself involved in the difficulty which Percy had humorously stated.

"Is the—is the foreign lady, who stays here, at home just now," was his adroit way of naming the "Oriental Mystery." "Can this gentleman see her? He will not detain her long."

Frank had expected that people who came upon such quests would find themselves at least objects of interest to those who must guess their business. He was quite struck by the easy, utter indifference of the dirty little serving-maid.

"Yes, Madame's in, sir," she answered, wiping her hands on her apron, "but I don't think she wants to see anybody to-day."

"Will you ask her, if you please," said Philip, with all his customary suavity of manner. "Say she has seen one of the gentlemen before, and knows about the other.

She won't want us to give our names, I am sure."

The girl seemed to listen only for the appearance of civility. Probably she knew well enough that "Madame's" refusals to be seen were guided entirely by some inner motives of Madame's own.

"I don't believe she will remember to repeat my messages," said Philip, as she went off, in seeming obedience. Certainly she scarcely remained away long enough to deliver them. She was at the door again in an instant. "Madame" was inexorable, nor did she send any excuse to soften the edge of her determination. The blunt statement was, "She can't see you to-day."

So the two young men could do nothing but retire.

"Does she smell a rat?" wondered Philip. "Does she think we come as spies and foes, rather than as inquiring friends? Has my being with you anything to do with her denial of herself, think you, Frank?"

"Goodness knows."

"It's all nonsense, of course. I only wish

ouisa was not so excited over it. And this isatisfactory ending to the affair will just ake her worse."

"I'll come here again to-morrow by myself," id Frank, his curiosity awakened now more an it had yet been. "We must get to the ttom of all this."

They did not return straightway to the nnells' house. Philip took his cousin with n for a saunter about the town, and he knew many people, and all were so glad of a chat th the lively young barrister, one and other offering luncheon, that it was after-on before they got home.

They found another visitor there: Marco arli. He was sitting in the drawing-room th Mrs. Connell, Louisa, and Evelyn Agate. iss Cleare was still with her pupils, and rs. Raven had retired to her own room, esumably to finish that letter to Leonard, hich last night's catastrophe had inter-pted.

Louisa's head was bowed over her needle-ork. Had anybody observed her narrowly, would have been seen that a very natural

dewdrop gemmed the flower she was embroidering. Mrs. Connell was talking to her guest with an air of more than usual solicitude and kindliness. Evelyn half-reclined on the sofa: there was a strange look on her face, which instantly struck Philip Connell, who knew her countenance so well. Marco's chair, placed forward in the centre of the group, was slightly turned towards her.

"I am sure Philip will be as sorry as we all are," said Mrs. Connell, turning towards her son, as he advanced with Frank into the room. "Philip, prepare for a disagreeable surprise: Signor Learli finds it necessary to leave Coltburn this evening."

"Not quite a surprise," murmured the young foreigner. "Miss Connell knows that even when I first arrived, I said my stay here was not likely to be so long as I had thought."

"Dear! but this is a sudden move!" exclaimed Philip, dropping into a chair. "Is it that the smoky atmosphere does not suit your southern constitution or your artistic inspiration? Oh, but you don't really mean

? Not to-night, at any rate! You are nly harrowing our feelings."

"It is my own feelings that are harrowed," aid the young painter, in his musical tones, 'ith a sudden flashing glance of his dark eyes)wards Evelyn. "Nay, I can never be etter nor happier than I might be at Colt-urn. If I waited till my own will took me ence, I might remain here for ever."

"I hope you have had no bad news," re-umed Philip seriously.

The Italian's face changed. Its soft, grace-ıl lines seemed to grow strong and hard; nd a strange darkness, so palpable that it eemed almost of the body as well as the)irit, settled on his brow.

"The command of necessity and the call duty cannot be bad news," he said, sternly. 'ith the last word he looked up, and met rs. Connell's kind eyes, fixed on him in otherly tenderness. The ice that had closed out him seemed to melt instantly. His lip en quivered.

"And Signor Learli will not say when we e to see him again," said she to the others.

"I want him to give me a promise for Christmas."

The young Italian shook his head. "The stray leaf goes before the wind," he answered. "The wind, and not the leaf, decides where it shall drop."

"But you think you shall be in this country then?" asked Mrs. Connell.

Marco did not answer readily. He reflected for a moment, and then said, simply:

"Yes."

Louisa looked up as he paused. She had commanded her face at last, and for a moment her eyes were free from tears. She longed to say to Marco, what would have seemed only natural civility to say, but for her consciousness of loving him so well—that surely he would not leave England without letting them know it, and, perhaps, seeing them before he went.

But the eyes which she fondly thought might have met her own were turned from her, and her glance only encountered Evelyn's. There was something in that glance which saved Louisa's poor woollen flowers from any more

wdrops! But her eyes burned and throbbed if in sharp contact with a cruel wind.

Then came another moment's silence. arco broke it, by saying to Evelyn, in a w voice: "Let me hear you speak to me ıce more in the tongue of my own country." She started up, and then sat down erect.

"You hear him," she said, looking round, an apology. "Pardon him—and me—but is so natural!"

And straightway she went on in Italian, ır manner sweet, her eyes fixed on him. What shall I say? I have no beautiful ıoughts to utter! What can I wish you, hen I do not know what you wish for your-elf? Only believe that I always wish you ell."

Marco answered in the same language, his npassioned tone hardly suppressed. "When hear your voice, it is enough. Will you ink of me while I am away? Will it matter *you* whether or not I ever return?"

"Will it not?" she said, softly.

"Confound it!" thought Philip. "I wish had made myself a more fluent Latin scholar,

and then I should surely be able to make out a word here and there! It is my private impression that they are saying something uncommonly sweet."

Louisa rose, gently laid her work aside, and retired. Marco did not even seem to notice her going.

"All your friends here hope to see you again," said Evelyn.

"Do *you?*" he asked, passionately.

"I do," she said, dropping her eyelids. Mrs. Connell thought the girl was showing more womanly feeling than she had believed she possessed, for she seemed to be trembling. This sudden and desperate avowal of the passion she had consciously awakened, had actually startled even Evelyn Agate.

In the moment Marco first set eyes on her, he had awakened to the fact, that his fancy for Louisa Connell had been nothing but a pleasant friendship.

"If I live, you shall see me again," he murmured in answer. "Not here. Somewhere else—where we can speak together face to face, unheard, unwatched. I know

ıere to find you. Every fact I have heard out you is garnered in my heart. For a ıile, think of me. If I never come, forget ɜ. Say to yourself, 'One more unhappy ıe is gone to his rest.'"

"I shall wait for you," said Evelyn calmly. Believe that."

They were standing up now, side by side, r he had risen to leave. He held out his ınd and took hers. No other pledge was ɔssible between the two then and there; and ɜrhaps no tenderer caress would have been harmony with Marco's high-strung mood. ou would not have guessed them to be a ıir of parting lovers; they did not look like . Mrs. Connell thought only that the lad's oetic imagination and hungry heart had ansformed the simple girl who spoke his ıother-tongue into an inspiring genius—a ersonification of his own restless patriot-ım.

They followed him through the hall to the ery door. He did not ask after Percy (who as out), or Alice Cleare, or the little girls; ıo, nor after Mr. Connell.

Did he remember that he had not said good-bye to Louisa? She, standing in her own room, with clasped hands and straining eyes, wondered if she could run down and snatch a hasty farewell, whether she was heeded or not. If she let him go without one, how would she feel after he was gone? But oh! he was sure to ask for her at the very last; and if she had courage and faith to wait for that it would leave her so much happier than if she sought it. She could hear the voices talking.

"Are you going straight from Coltburn?" Philip asked. "Shall you leave by the last train? Would it not be nice if some of us ran down to the station at the last, and saw you off?"

There was a moment's hesitation before Marco replied.

"My movements are a little uncertain," he said then. "I may have to go a short way out of the town to transact a slight matter of business on my way. If so, I shall drive on thence and catch the train at the next station. I would rather part with you

here—at the door of your own home. Good-bye! good-bye!"

He was gone—without one word or thought for Louisa! She threw herself on her bed, and it was the same to the poor girl as if all the world had come to an end.

The others went back to the drawing-room. If there was fire in Evelyn's eyes, there was moisture in Mrs. Connell's.

"Poor boy!" she said. "There is certainly some mystery about him. I always fancy he feels something looming before his eyes. What can it be? I suppose creatures as slight as he, in the eyes of their contemporaries, have had their hand in the world's history before now."

As she spoke, she went to the window and hasped it, and drew the curtains. They would not be in that room again till all was dark, and after the preceding night she felt a little nervous.

It was the tapping of Evelyn at Louisa's door which aroused the girl from her ecstasy of pain—Evelyn's rap and her clear, bell-like tone, announcing that it would soon be dinner

time. And poor Louisa, with true womanly instinct, struggled to suppress all signs of misery, and went forth apparently calm. The breaking-down might come later, but it should not be in the sight of Evelyn.

In honour of the presence of Mrs. Raven, accustomed to state and show, the Connell dinners were made much more formal affairs than when the family were alone. In this respect, at least, Mrs. Connell had refused Philip's advice to persist in the ordinary household programme, and make no difference of any kind. Dessert was on the table, when the servant came in and whispered something to Louisa, which caused her face to flush vividly, as she instructed the girl to "tell mamma."

"Marco Learli back again!" exclaimed Mrs. Connell. "He says we are not to be interrupted if we are at dinner; he will wait. For whom did he ask, Julia?"

"For me, surely!" cried Percy, springing to his feet.

"No, sir," said the girl; "he asked for Miss Connell."

"You had better go to him at once, Louisa," said her mother, "and if he can really wait, stay with him until we have finished."

"You see I was right," whispered Evelyn to Philip.

"Right?" he replied, not understanding her.

"That some adieux cannot be made in public."

"Hang it!" thought Philip, glancing at his adversary. "She's playing with us all somehow—as false as a hare!"

How light can a heart grow in a moment! Louisa wondered how she could ever have doubted Marco. She saw now what it was—that he had never forgotten her—it was but the coyness of love which had withheld him from asking for her—just as the desperate pain of silent parting had now driven him back. He had come, and that was enough.

But as she entered the drawing-room she started. Where was he? Had he vanished? Before she had time for a thought, he stepped forward from the window, letting the curtains

close again behind him. Oh, what a face of agony he had! And how strange it was that even that did not make her feel less happy!

"I have to say good-bye," he said, "and to bring back that."

He held out a little volume of poems with Louisa's name in it, which they had read together during their first meetings by the sea, and which he had hitherto retained in memory of those happy days.

"It was a gift," gasped Louisa. After all, there was something in his face which frightened her. This was no lover's sorrow. It was terror; it was despair.

"Take it again," he said, in that strange, low voice; "take it, and forget me. I shall never forget you"—Louisa's heart leaped—"nor your mother, nor your home. It was a vision I had, and it is gone. Well for you that it is so! Good-bye, Miss Connell! good-bye for ever!"

"Oh, Marco, do not go like this!" sobbed the girl, in heart-rending bewilderment, as he turned to the door. She felt herself power-

s as a silken thread to hold him, and in
r misery she uttered what she knew were
ile pleas the moment they passed her lips :
ɔtay and see papa—and Percy."

" Let me go," he cried, drawing away his
ɑd. " It was all a mistake, and we must
rt."

And here again Louisa's weakness came
her rescue. A larger nature would have
ɔn maddened by its pain into utter uncon-
ɔusness of everything except its present
ɣuish. But Louisa remembered Evelyn,
l the slow tortures of days to come.
thout a word she walked out of the
.wing-room before Marco. Without a
rd she stepped before him down the hall.
t at the dining-room door she paused, and
ew it open.

' Papa, Percy, Signor Learli came back to
· good-bye to you ; and as he is really
haste, I know you don't mind being
ɛrrupted."

Despite his unwillingness, he had to enter;
l that was how it ended—in another round
hand-shakings and inquiries and regrets.

Evelyn did not leave her seat at the dining-table, and Louisa came back and resumed hers before the door had closed behind Marco.

Everybody retired early, because everybody was tired. No disturbance occurred that night. But in that small, quiet, comfortable household there were two—one of the young people and one of the seniors—who never closed their eyes.

One lay with her face buried in her pillow. The other drew her curtains aside, and sat down beside her unscreened window—and watched.

What did Mrs. Raven watch for? What did she see? Why did she find herself an hour afterwards returning to consciousness seated in her chair by the window, her candle burned down, and the moon, which had been shining so brightly, lost behind thick clouds? If she had told Philip what she had seen, he might have answered her that dreams are strange combinations of the facts and fancies of past hours.

But when we are not sure of ourselves

er we are waking or sleeping; when
l that if our fancies are fancies they are
than facts, because they leave no solid
l whereon to set our own soul, then we
to keep our own counsel.

nobody was disturbed that night by
und in Mr. Connell's house.

CHAPTER IX.

ADMITTED.

THE next morning rose dull and grey, with a fine drizzle of rain, one of those genuinely English days which come at the most unexpected seasons, and serve, at least, as material for conversation.

Mrs. Raven did not appear at breakfast. Word came down that she was not well. And when Mrs. Connell went to see her she was struck by her nervous and wrung appearance. She thought that these must be traces of latent suffering: this passing indisposition alone surely could not produce them! The kind woman's heart warmed to her. She was her brother's widow, after all.

Mrs. Connell was startled to find that Mrs. Raven seemed to have set her heart on going home, saying that she found she was in no condition to be anybody's guest, and that she feared the change, from which she had hoped so much, was only making her worse.

"My dear—sister," Mrs. Connell actually said, in her compassion, "you have not given it a fair trial yet. I believe that fright the other night has upset you. You must not imagine such a thing is likely to occur again. I can assure you such incidents are as rare here as they can be at Raven. I know how you country folk credit towns with everything that is uncomfortable and wicked. But we have lived here nearly thirty years, and nothing of this sort has happened before."

"Perhaps it happened in my honour," said Mrs. Raven, with a sickly smile. "You ought to be glad to get quit of me."

Mrs. Connell protested, and then went off to her kitchen to give sundry directions about dainties for the invalid's lunch. She gathered an impression that that domestic section of

her house was not in perfect peace. Minton was in a state of dignified displeasure with Julia, the younger servant. But the mistress did not choose to make any inquiries. Mrs. Connell rarely interfered with her delegates in kitchen or schoolroom. If they were found not fit to be wholly trusted, then it was time for them to be deposed.

Certainly there was no gainsaying the good sense of the remark which Mrs. Connell overheard falling from Minton's lips.

"Don't tell me any falsehoods, Julia," said that worthy woman. "That's sure to be the upshot of flurries and hurries and frights, and things that can't be accounted for. They serve well enough as excuses for ways that need excuses. It isn't the first time that you've not known what you were doing. There! say no more. If you had done it, as was your duty, and as you say it was done, then I should have found it done this morning, and there's an end on't."

When Mrs. Connell returned to the sick-room, she met her nephew coming out of it. Frank had been paying his mother a visit.

To him, too, she spoke of a speedy return home. She would go as soon as possible. She could not rise to-day, but she would be able to travel to-morrow.

"I don't think you should have left your room either, Miss Connell," said Evelyn, addressing Louisa later. "I am quite sure you are suffering, like your aunt; and, like her, you would have been better at rest and in quietness."

"I always suffer when I lose any sleep," answered Louisa bravely; "but I never allow myself to give way to mere sensations of languor and weariness."

Frank looked at his cousin when he heard his little colloquy. How pale and changed he was! Was this the same girl whose blooming beauty had so struck him when he first arrived at Coltburn so short a time back? And the havoc in her appearance seemed to have been wrought in the last few hours.

Frank wondered. Had Louisa's nerves really been so shaken by the interview with the woman—in conjunction possibly with the fright that occurred the following night?

He recalled his promise to go to the "Oriental Mystery" to-day.

Only he shrank from it. It was odd how reluctant he felt to do what he knew to be contrary to the views held by Alice Cleare. Why should the wisdom of this young governess, younger even than himself, have so much weight with him? To be sure it came commended by her sweet face and patient, cheerful life; which, since he knew what he knew of her losses and sorrows and heroisms, seemed to him as a life bearing witness of the unfailing goodness of God.

"Miss Cleare," he said to her, lingering in the morning-room after breakfast, while she was busily correcting one of her pupils' exercises, "does it puzzle you very much if people don't always act as if they saw things in what you see to be the right light?"

Alice laughed aloud.

"Do you mean to insinuate that I always think I am right?" she asked merrily.

"No, no, certainly not," he answered, flushing, as he saw how easily his speech could bear this playful interpretation, and felt

how hard it was to express his real meaning. "No, no; but would you imagine that anybody must surely set very light value on your opinions if they did not entirely follow them out?"

Alice was quite grave now. She looked up at him with her pure, sweet eyes, as she answered:

"I should be quite satisfied with whatever anybody did, if I felt sure they were only seeking to do what was right and kind. Opinions may differ about details, but I think those who honestly seek to follow good and escape evil are sure to meet at the goal. Opinions change, too. Some matters which I once deemed harmless, I now think wrong; and in what I once thought I saw harm, I now see none."

"It is not always easy to know what is right," Frank observed.

Alice went on diligently with her work.

"To do that which really seems to us right is the surest way to learn what is best, I believe," she said timidly; "though in the course of the lesson we may have to undo our own work."

"Thank you, Miss Cleare," said Frank. "So, if I do my best, you will be really satisfied with me—though my best may be poor enough! There have not been too many people satisfied with me yet!" he added, a little sadly.

From this conversation he went, without speaking to Philip, straight off to Daylight Villa. He did not like his errand, but he had, in a manner, promised to go to help Louisa—not but that it was a bit of a puzzle to him, a thing he had never understood quite clearly, how anything the witch might communicate to himself could relieve Louisa's state of nervous terror.

Would the strange woman refuse to see him again? If so, he could not help it. He would not allow himself to think whether he would be glad or sorry; or even whether, or no, he expected another denial.

But this time the untidy serving-girl opened wide the door.

"Madame is at home," she said, "and quite disengaged."

CHAPTER X.

A SECRET AND A SIGNET RING.

FRANK RAVEN, admitted at last to Daylight Villa, within the doors of which the "Oriental Mystery" at present abode, followed the girl into the dreary and darkened little parlour. Scarcely was he seated, before the "Oriental Mystery" entered.

It certainly seemed her pleasure to remain a mystery. Frank saw before him a tall woman of a massive figure, who advanced into the room with a noiseless, gliding step. He could distinguish little more, for on her head she wore a large veil of coarse black lace, whose heavy edge fell about her face so closely that her eyes only glittered through

it, and nothing of her visage was seen, except the nose and the thin, but large and loose, lips. Still, she seemed to remind him of somebody or something.

She spoke no greeting. She crossed the room in silence, and seated herself in an arm-chair which stood about four feet from Frank.

"You are come," she said then, in a low, deep voice. "I thought you would."

"What can you know of me?" asked Frank, who felt aware that his pulse beat a little heavily.

"What do you know of yourself?" she returned, in the same tone. "Shall we call you Frank Raven, of Ravenscourt? That is what your friends call you, you know."

"What do you mean?" he inquired. It struck him that perhaps she had reason to expect more than one strange visitor that morning, and was employing a little ruse to find out which of them was before her.

"What I say," she answered, coolly. "Look into your own heart. What does that say? It doesn't deceive you. What it says is true."

"But this is gibberish," retorted Frank. "It may mean anything or nothing. You cannot expect me to believe it has any meaning."

Could it be that some genuine emotion thrilled the woman as she sat before him, or was she only enacting the *rôle* of her craft? It seemed to Frank as if something like a sob ran through her.

"You have never known a mother's love," she said, in a whisper. "Poor little mite! in your silks and velvets!"

"You are wrong," said loyal Frank. His inmost heart echoed back her words, but he chose to think she meant him to understand that she believed his mother to be dead.

"Have you, then, ever known a mother's love?" she asked sharply, with a stern emphasis on the question. "You need not answer—except to yourself."

And Frank was silent. "What else do you wish to say to me?" he asked coldly.

"I see the house where you have lived all your life until recently," she resumed. "It is a great house, standing among ancient

trees; and it is full of servants who think there is nobody in the world like the Raven family. I see the Squire who is dead but lately. I see you toddling after him, and he taking you up and kissing you. I see you with him when you get on to be a growing lad. He might scold you sometimes—he always loved you."

Frank put a stern restraint upon himself. He would ask her no question, but he looked at her earnestly. How did she know all these things? She spoke with an assumption of power, as though her knowledge were unlimited. Was it possible she would have aught to say about his father's strange will? She went on:

"I can tell you about some of your servants—those who have been long with you, and whose lives have grown to be almost as a part of the family. There is an old white-haired man-servant, whom the dead Squire liked and trusted. There is a woman-servant, whose heart is very warm and kind—but I don't think she cares much for Mrs. Raven. Then there is a little old woman about

the house—stay, is she altogether a servant?"

Frank had set his mind against answering questions. "Say what you think yourself," was his only reply.

"Well, I think she was a servant once," rejoined the woman; "a superior servant. She is not a sweet-looking person—nor always sweet-tempered. She was very fond of the late Squire, and she is very fond of you. I see her—I see her—watching you—always watching you. It is the morning of your going away—stay. Yes, I see her standing in your room; she is handing you a newspaper——"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Frank, at last startled from his reserve by the recollection of that morning, the one of his departure from Ravenscourt, when Charity Hale had come into his room with the county newspaper. Certain facts concerning the household might be patent to a wide public, but how could a little private scene like that become known?

"Ay," said the woman, with a sudden

change of manner, quite different from that which she had hitherto shown. "That stirs you, does it?"

"Of course I am puzzled to imagine how you can know these things," acknowledged Frank.

"Ah, you perceive I do know things, then! Do you wish me to go on and tell you all I know?"

"I suppose you had best tell me what it was that made you wish to see me," answered Frank.

"Shall I tell you who it is that will be your wife?" she asked.

Frank was sorely vexed that he could not keep a tell-tale flush from mounting to the very roots of his hair. A curious self-consciousness was stirring his heart.

"You are not able to tell me that," he rejoined. "Probably I shall never have a wife."

The woman laughed faintly.

"You young men all say that. Especially when your heart tells you who it is you would like to have."

What should he do? He hated to think that by his means—through his being there—Alice Cleare should be commented upon by this obscure and crafty woman. How could he stop it? He sat in silence, inwardly writhing.

"I see her. She is tall and slim"—and Frank had very nearly burst in here with the interruption, "She is not tall." "There is gold in her hair. It is like the old red gold that frames the miniatures which I see hanging in an oak cabinet in Ravenscourt. Her initials——"

"You are talking nonsense," interrupted Frank: "and it is nonsense which I do not like, because it seems almost like an insult to——"

"The initials of her name are an E. and an A.," quietly continued the woman.

"Eh—what?" exclaimed Frank, taken by surprise, as he perceived it was not Alice Cleare who was indicated.

"You do know one whose initials are E. and A. Ay, I perceive so. And there is your wife that is to be."

"You are entirely wrong," spoke Frank hotly.

"Am I? You know what you know: but you do not know all. There is a threatening ghost which walks in the grounds at Ravenscourt—that does not matter much; there are ghosts walking about most grand houses, if people's eyes are open to see them. The young lady with the gold in her hair can lay that ghost for you: and you for that reason will marry her."

Frank's mind was in a state of bewilderment.

"And when you have married her the ghost will cease to walk in Raven Park, and that strange old woman in the Court-corridor will be at rest, and even Mrs. Raven"—and here there was a drawl as of contempt in her voice—"may learn to love you!"

"I don't know what you are talking about," stammered Frank; but there was sufficient method in her vaticinations to make his ears tingle as he heard them. "And I don't believe you know yourself," he added, bluntly, pricking up his scattered wits.

The woman laughed. It sounded to Frank a cruel, defiant, ironical laugh. She rose up. Frank also sprang to his feet.

"I have told you nothing but nonsense, you say! Beware that you do not, in your foolhardiness, make an enemy of one who knows what I know — what I can tell you!"

A hundred ideas chased each other through Frank Raven's mind. Did she hope to extort money? Was she going mad?—it was not unlikely that a perverted mind such as hers should suddenly lose its balance, he thought.

"Nobody knows anything of me which they are not free to proclaim to the whole world," he said to her steadily.

"You are brave, young man," she answered; "brave, because you think your secret is safe in your own breast. For it is a secret which you may well say nobody has ever told you."

"I don't understand you in the least," declared Frank. "I have no secret." And he must have been a very good actor if he

could have spoken an untruth so truthfully. Still this woman did not appear to believe him.

"Then I will speak out to you," she suddenly said, almost fiercely, "and you will wish you had heard and heeded me, without forcing me to that. There are truths which must be known to our innermost hearts, but which should never be breathed aloud. You are not the late Squire Henry Raven's son—you are not the son of Mrs. Raven."

Frank stood before her as one petrified. For the first time, she began to believe in his assertion of utter unconsciousness concerning the revelation she had to make. Her words seemed to have stunned him like an unexpected blow.

"There!" she said, in a strangely subdued tone, "you would have it out. I could not help it. It is not my fault."

"How dare you say this!" he burst forth. "Have you no thought of the evil you would do—of the wrong you would inflict by such words? But, pardon me for saying you have convicted yourself; for if you know one

truth, you should know all. Your belief that I knew this already is false; it serves to show how little I need trouble myself about the rest."

"*Yet it does trouble you,*" she answered, in a low voice.

"Yes, it does trouble me," he said, turning upon her with a vehemence so sharp that she actually started. "An evil thought—an evil suggestion—is always troublesome. It may not be dangerous: it may be scarcely harmful, but it disturbs the spirit."

"Most evil things do that. Nevertheless, we must sometimes encounter them. My motive was only good," she continued, gazing at Frank strangely, her tone almost a humble one, as though some doubt were swaying her. "I have not told you a lie, but the very truth, whether you knew it before or not."

"You declared positively that I did know it; and what you say now may be as true as that declaration was."

"I thought you must know it; I thought you could not fail to know it. Go back to

whence you came, and ask Mrs. Raven if she believes you to be her son."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," he answered indignantly. "My mother is sad and solitary enough, without being annoyed with absurdities such as these."

The woman drew herself back. He thought she looked strangely like a serpent going to spring. The resemblance grew stronger, as her next words came from between her teeth with a hiss.

"Did the late Squire, Henry Raven, make such provision for you as a favourite son might have expected?"

That blow told. Frank for the moment lost the reserve he had hitherto maintained.

"The will my father made was natural enough," he said. "He simply trusted me to my mother during her lifetime."

The woman came a step nearer to him.

"Suppose," she whispered, "suppose that he had reason to hope that long before Mrs. Raven's death you would have taken the advice I have given you to-day—the advice about your wife that is to be? That will

was dated very shortly before he died—is it not so?"

"That is true," admitted Frank.

"If he could have spoken to you between the making of that will and his death, how do you know what he might have told you, or what he might have bidden you to do?" she asked, in the same strange, low, yet clearly audible voice, which somehow seemed to make Frank's flesh creep. "He is speaking to you *now*," she went on solemnly. "You will not heed me: so he shows himself to me, and bids me describe him to you. He is standing at your right side now. He is a tall man, with a pleasant country face and iron-grey hair. He—yes, he has an imperfection in one front tooth. He puts his left hand on your right shoulder: he wears a ring—a large cornelian stone in a heavy gold setting. It has a figure engraved on it. He holds it so that I can see it. It is a woman, a sort of goddess, with a horn of plenty in her hand. Hist! he lets it fall. What was that sound?"

Frank started. Something had undoubtedly

fallen with a chink against the leg of a chair. In the shadowy light and with swimming head he stooped to grope for it. There it was—his dead father's ring! There was no mistaking that familiar jewel—an ancient heirloom—which he had played with as a baby, and had sometimes been allowed to take from his father's finger to put for a minute on his own during his boyhood.

Nothing within the range of Frank's imagination could have struck him with a sense of horror so ghastly as this—the sight, the touch of that ring, with its homely, happy memories.

"How did this come here?" he gasped.

"How should I know?" the woman returned; and she bent forward to look at the ring seemingly as curiously as he. "I was but describing what I saw with the second sight. Do you know the ring? It seems to be the one I have just seen on the late Squire Raven's finger."

"Yes," said Frank, almost reluctantly; "it is the one my father always wore."

He pressed his hand upon his perplexed

brow. What could the mystery be? He knew that Leonard had had charge of it since his father's death, but where it had been kept he did not know. Leonard had placed it on his own finger, as of right; but it was too large—it fell off, and so he did not wear it.

"Don't you believe me now? And won't you heed me?" she demanded.

"It only makes it all the more strange—more mysterious," he answered; "it does not follow that it is more truthful. Who are you? Where do you come from?"

"Is not my message enough?" she asked. "What need have you to think of the messenger?"

"The greatest need," he replied promptly. "If I could find out who you are, I might discover how you get your knowledge of our affairs. For when you tried to penetrate farther than external facts you failed. You were quite wrong in your guess about my knowing any secret."

"As you please. I was not wrong about E. A.," she added quickly. "Your father

beckons to her. He wants you to stand side by side—hand in hand. If you do not——"

"You are not right about E. A. And what has my father to do with it?"

"I cannot say. If you——"

"You have said just before that he was not my father."

"If you do not comply with his wishes, there will be trouble and scandal and disgrace; and perhaps wrong will triumph, and right go to the wall. If you do, all will be peace and quietness—peace and quietness."

"Good can never come by doing harm," said Frank. "I judge of your message by what it would enjoin on me. A man can never do a meaner thing than marry a woman he does not love."

"You can but obey."

"Never," said Frank calmly. "To him, my dead father, I could only say what I should have said to my father living—that not even for his sake could I play the traitor to my own heart—my own soul."

The next moment he felt angry with himself for speaking so under such circumstances,

and to such a woman as this must be. He took out his purse.

"Some relatives of mine who had an interview with you the other day parted from you in your debt," he said, coldly. "I presume I also owe you something for our conversation to-day. Do you consider that I ought to pay for the advertisement you inserted in the newspaper, urging that your message to me should be delivered? Please to name what sum will satisfy you."

"I will not take one farthing," she said, in a tone as chilly as his own, "neither from them nor from you. Rely upon that."

"Pardon me if I do not thank you," answered Frank. "I would prefer to pay you."

She turned her face full upon him. Her eyes glittered under the heavy black veil.

"And I prefer the account between us to stand open," she said, smiting her hand on the back of a chair as she spoke.

"That is what I feel your conduct means," said Frank, with as much composure as he could command. "And I prefer not to keep

open accounts. I think we have no more to say to each other. But it must be discovered who you are and where you come from, and I shall try my best at it. Good-morning, madam."

"Stop," she cried. "Go back to the house you came from, Frank Raven, that of Mr. Connell, and go alone into the drawing-room. Against the wall between the windows stands a little table. On it are two china jars, or vases, containing pots with flowers growing in them. The flowers are, I think, geraniums, and the vases are alike, only one has a green rim and the other a blue one. Take up the *blue* one, remove the flower, and under the earth you will find a sealed envelope. It and its contents are for you."

"What are the contents?"

"That you will soon see. If they do not convince you that they come from a friend, from one to whom your welfare is worth something, and whose advice is not cheaply given, then nothing else will, and you must go to your doom. Beware! I say it to you for the second time. You stand to-day where

two roads branch off, roads that are not likely to meet again. Take heed which you choose, if you care that the future should be well with you. And now go, for I can do no more."

Frank slightly bowed his head, cast back a parting glance at the strange figure standing motionless in the gloom, and obeyed. Halting on the doorstep, he considered what he should do next. The woman would no doubt understand that he meant to institute an inquiry. Perhaps his declaration had been over-candid—but Frank liked to be open in all he did. Of not even an enemy would he take an unfair advantage.

Did he expect to find anything in the china pot in Mrs. Connell's drawing-room? He did not know. After that incident of the ring, he was prepared for any marvel. That ring—that ring! He had placed it on his finger unhindered by the woman. But for that ring, he should already, in the open sunshine and fresh air, have begun to think of the whole affair as a common mystification and humbug. But this testified to a real mystery.

Frank glanced at his watch. A train would be leaving Coltburn Station in less than half an hour. There would not depart another till nearly three hours later. This woman must be very rapid in her movements if she could take flight so readily, but such a contingency must be provided against—and his mind was made up.

CHAPTER XI.

WITH THE DETECTIVES.

FRANK RAVEN moved off the doorstep and walked quickly towards the police station. He had noticed it when with Philip the previous day. He wanted the services of a detective to watch the departing train and Daylight Villa.

He was shown into a bare room, and did not wait for two minutes. His card, on which he had scribbled "urgent," and which bore "Ravenscourt, Hants," engraved on the corner, brought two efficient officers into his presence immediately.

Probably Frank seemed a little haughty in his awkwardness and his haste. But if so, it

did not repel those two experienced men. They glanced at each other the moment they saw Frank, silently, as it were, exchanging thoughts. This would be a good case of some sort. It was no frivolous "fast" business which had brought to them this young aristocrat, with his open brow and clear eyes. Frank remembered the speedily-departing train, and lost no time in introducing the business, and strove to be as brief and lucid as he could.

There was one officer who spoke, and one officer who watched. Both had note-books.

"There is a woman in this town calling herself 'The Oriental Mystery,'" began Frank. "Have you heard of her?"

"Certainly, certainly; her placards are on all the walls."

"She stays at Daylight Villa," added Frank.

"Yes, yes," returned the speaking officer, as though all this were superfluous; "she gives that address."

"I think it exceedingly likely that she may

make a speedy flight by the next train," said Frank; "if so, I want it to be ascertained where she goes."

The officer did not seem quite so attentive to this as he had been to the preceding remarks; but he gave a slight inclination of the head, to signify that he had heard. Then he turned to his companion and said a few rapid words, in the cursory tone in which one inquires whether a fire is being kept up, or gives any such trivial direction. The silent officer crossed the room, opened a door and disappeared for a few seconds. He came back, still in silence. Frank heard footsteps pass down the passage outside, even while he repeated the request—the urgency of which he feared had not been fully comprehended.

"Yes, yes," repeated the officer, "that can be easily done. But of what do you suspect her, or accuse her? Of course we must know that; or, as you may be aware, we should have no right to proceed."

"Well, she—she is certainly a fortune-teller," observed Frank, who suddenly found

himself rather at a loss. "I have just been to her."

The officer smiled.

"What did she do?" he inquired.

"She professed to describe the dead; and she detailed particulars of my past and present history," explained Frank.

"Good," said the officer, writing; "and she demanded money for this, as a matter of course?"

"No," dissented Frank, "she demanded none; she even refused it when I offered it to her."

The officer put down his book. "Then I don't see what we can do for you, if this was all. Do you, Mr. Cran?" he asked, turning to his watching colleague. "People may tell any fabulous tales they please, if they do it simply for the love of the thing."

"Perhaps this was not all?" gruffly spoke Mr. Cran. If it had been all, neither of them saw why the young man should come to them.

"Did she merely describe the dead to you;

or did she profess to call up a figure of it to your sight?" asked the other.

"She only described it."

"But that is what any of us could do. Well, sir, what else?"

Frank felt thoroughly nonplussed. The officers were watching him; they seemed inclined to be as eager as he in the matter, if they could only be shown what the matter was.

"Look at that ring," he said, holding out his hand. "That belonged to my dead father; and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it was safely locked up at Ravenscourt, in Hampshire, under my brother's keeping. Yet, during this woman's professed description of my dead father just now, this ring drops—from somewhere—at my feet. Is that anything you can go upon?"

The note-books were busy again. "That will do for a beginning, sir," said Frank's chief interrogator. "The fact of possession has to be accounted for, you see. Of course she may have become possessed of it in some legitimate way that you know nothing of.

Did she describe your dead father accurately, or not?"

"Quite so," replied Frank.

"Possibly she had seen him during his lifetime?"

"Well—yes—possibly. But I do not see how she could have come at other things she said."

"And you want to find this out. Well, Mr. Raven, as you have come to us, and you, of course, understand that we cannot work in the dark, you will not object to answer a few questions, will you? Of course you speak to us in confidence."

"I will answer everything I can," readily assented Frank. "But, in the meantime, I'm afraid that first train from Coltburn will have started, and she will have got her chance of leaving the town."

"Oh, that's all right," said the officer, reassuringly. "One of our men was sent to the station at once. And now to business. You never saw this person before to-day, sir?"

"Never, to my knowledge," answered Frank.

"And what made you go to her?"

"I went partly to oblige some friends of mine," said Frank. "They had seen her, and had been puzzled by her; and, in her interview with them, she described me, and said she wished to see me. I daresay I should not have gone, but one of the young ladies had got nervous about the woman, and I really went hoping to bring back proofs that she was but a chattering impostor. And so that's how it was."

"And had this woman anything special to tell you, sir?"

"She told me something—something which she believed I knew as a secret."

"And——?" both listeners were waiting intently for the answer.

"It was something I had never heard of —something I believe to be entirely false," said Frank.

"Can you tell us what it was?"

"I would rather not—unless it is absolutely necessary. I believe it is false, utterly and absolutely. In fact, a made-up lie."

"Nothing more likely, sir. Only the fact of the lie might help us to search for it source, as well as for the rest of the information and the possession of the ring—all of which are puzzling you."

"Was this information—this secret—given with a view of tendering you any advice?" spoke up the silent Mr. Cran.

Frank started. This man had been hitherto so nearly mute, that his voice, at once touching the right key, sounded like that of an oracle. The detective noticed the start, and thought within himself that with a little extra knowledge of human nature and the world, anybody could set up for a witch.

"It was," said Frank, answering the question with a slight hesitancy, resolving that he must not be drawn into telling them what the advice was. That he did not like Evelyn Agate set him free from no rule of honour and loyalty.

A short pause ensued. When the next question came, Frank began to wonder

ıether these men too had the power to ad people's thoughts.

"On the subject of marriage, probably?" ›oke the reticent Mr. Cran.

"Y—e—s," said Frank, trying to look ›ol and unconcerned.

"Excuse me, sir," said the detective, "but ave you any idea of following the advice ffered you?"

"Certainly not," said Frank sharply.

"And this secret, that she thought you new, she called a fact, I presume? Was it f grave import?"

"She called it a fact; and it was very grave ıdeed. It was very disagreeable indeed, ıd I must keep it to myself for that reason," ıdded candid Frank, "false though I am sure is. There's the ring."

"Yes, there's the ring," admitted the fficer, his tone a slighting one—"and it is in ›ur possession now. So, however it got ıto hers, presuming that it did get into it, ——"

"Why, of course it got into it," interrupted 'rank.

"However that may have been, it has found its way back to its lawful owner."

"Scarcely," answered Frank. "It belongs to my elder brother, not to me. Other property may have passed out of the Court, which might not be readily missed—or so easy to recognise as the ring."

"And you can be quite sure—pardon the inquiry, but we find such strange mistakes do happen—that this ring could not have been about your own person when you entered Daylight Villa?"

"As sure as I can be of anything. I had never seen it since about the time of my father's funeral."

"Well, what you wish, Mr. Raven, is that we should discover the antecedents of this woman. We will do our best. I presume there is no objection to our pushing our inquiries in any direction which seems advisable—down at your place, Ravenscourt, for example, whence the ring appears to have come?"

"My brother's place, not mine," corrected Frank. "No, I see no objection. Of

ɔurse, I have not yet had much time to ɔnsider matters. I came here straight from 'aylight Villa, because there was not a oment to be lost."

"You are staying in Coltburn?"

"Yes, at my uncle's—the Rev. James onnell. I may add," said Frank, as he rose ɔ leave, "that this woman made another ɔmmunication to me, which I can verify or lsify on my return to his house. If I find true, I shall think the rest all the more :range."

"Should we have anything special to com- ıunicate, you will get a note from us. Good- ay, sir."

The detective bowed him out, and then 'ent back to his silent colleague.

"What that woman told him is true," said ıe oracular Cran. "I only wonder what it 'as."

"You don't mean to say he knew it was rue!" exclaimed the other, with genuine ncredulity. "I don't believe it, Cran. I ıever heard truth spoken at all if he was not

speaking it when he said he was sure it was a lie."

"You are rash, Jones," corrected Mr. Cran. "Of course, he was sure; thought he was. People never do believe the truth: it's not in human nature. I didn't say the young fellow was telling a lie: he is not the sort to do it. Don't jump to conclusions."

Jones pulled out his watch and looked at it. "The train is off by this time," he remarked, "and our man ought soon to be back."

Mr. Cran walked into the outer room to await him. He did not have to wait long—"our man," who looked like a quiet, simple country shopman, came in.

"Train off—and party did not go," was his brief report.

Mr. Cran put on his hat. "I am going to Daylight Villa myself, Jones," said he. "There is more in all this than meets the eye."

And as Frank hastened to Mr. Connell's house, among his many crowding thoughts,

there cropped up the quaint reflection that until this interview with the detectives, he had never realized that silent listening might be elevated into one of the fine arts.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLUE-RIMMED JAR.

WHEN Frank Raven reached the house, it was the younger servant, Julia, who admitted him. Her eyes were still red after the scolding Minton had administered to her in the retirement of the kitchen, and she answered Frank's questions in the subdued tone of one who only hopes not to be found fault with.

"Mr. Philip was out," she said, "and so was Miss Louisa." Their papa had taken them with him to drive to the house of a gentleman in the country, and they were not expected back until the evening.

"How is Mrs. Raven now?" questioned Frank.

"No better, sir," answered the girl; "at least Minton thinks so. The mistress has been with her nearly all the morning, and so has Miss Agate. She has quite set her mind on going back to Ravenscourt to-morrow, it's said, and Miss Agate is in a great state about her."

Frank stood in the hall, bewildered. What was he to do next? He would like to make his search in the drawing-room at once, and he had wanted Philip to be with him, not caring to make it alone.

He turned towards the dining-room, expecting to find that apartment empty, for this was the hour when Miss Cleare and her pupils usually took their daily exercise. But he was mistaken. Seated in the large bow-window, beside the big myrtle, on which Mrs. Connell prided herself, with a mass of white work streaming from her knee to the floor all around her, was Alice Cleare. Children, and all else, seemed to be out.

She raised her head as the door opened. Her face was smiling. When she saw it was Frank, the smile faded into a look of earnest

interrogation, prepared to patiently go unanswered. He could see at once that the remarks he had made to her had not passed unheeded from her mind.

"I have done what you advised us all not to do," he said, with a sort of candid desperation. "I have been to see the witch—the 'Oriental Mystery.'"

"I thought that was the matter in hand," she said directly. "I felt quite certain that the others saw her when they went to the Cave; it was only likely you would be interested and go in your turn."

"It cannot be said that I went out of mere interest," Frank answered, gravely. "I can scarcely tell you why I went, Miss Cleare, without interfering with other people's secrets. But I did go; and I found a very strange woman, and heard a very strange story, and saw some very strange things."

He paused there, not caring to mention the ring. Frank shrank from offering Alice Cleare any half confidence, and whole confidence he could not yet give.

"She spoke to me concerning some matters

unknown to me, and which I do not believe," he continued, "and she told me, as a test to her veracity and good faith, that I should find something in a certain place in this house on my return. She did not tell me what it was, only where I was to look for it. There is a table between the drawing-room windows —is there not?"

"Yes—a walnut-wood card-table," answered Alice. "It is always kept closed, and is covered with books and ornaments. Miss Connell told me it had never once been used."

"Can you remember any of the ornaments on it?"

Alice shook her head.

"They have been changed two or three times since I came here," she replied. "Some sketch-books and albums usually lie on it; and I think some other things are there just now. Yes, I remember. A little table used to stand in the windows, supporting, each, a vase with a flower-pot in it. When your mother and Miss Agate were coming, Mrs. Connell thought those small tables might

be handy in the bedrooms ; and she removed the vases and flower-pots to the card-table, and had the other tables taken upstairs."

"Can you describe the vases, Miss Cleare ?"

Alice looked at him in some surprise as she reflected.

"They have a white ground with coloured rims, and a wreath of roses running round the base."

"The woman spoke of these jars as not being quite alike : one had a green rim, she said, and one a blue one."

"It is quite possible," said Alice, hardly knowing whether to take all this seriously : "and very easy to ascertain. What about the flower-pots—and the rims ?"

"I am to look in the blue-rimmed one," explained Frank, rising from the chair which he had taken while they talked. "Miss Cleare, may I ask you a favour ?"

"Yes, certainly," she said. "If there's anything I can do for you ?"

"Will you join me in this search : and see, with me, what I find, and where I find it ?

I am afraid there is some underhand work in all this," he hastened to add, in reply to her evident surprise, "which must, if possible, be brought to light; and we know two pairs of eyes give surer evidence than one. I would not trouble you if Philip were at home, and I do not care to speak about the affair to my aunt, or any other part of the family."

"I will come, Mr. Raven."

"I'm not asking you to do anything you think wrong, I hope? I know how much you dislike secrets and mysteries."

Her sweet eyes looked into his with great sincerity. "I do not think it wrong," she assured him; "and I am not doing it out of any curiosity—or desire to pry into hidden things. I am doing it to help you to do what you feel is right. You do feel that, don't you?"

"I do—I do," said Frank earnestly. "I cannot tell you much about this business yet, Miss Cleare; but there are false assertions (as I believe them) to be unmasked, and facts to be found out, and I have got to do it, if I can."

The drawing-room was in a flood of mellow sunshine. Straight before them, as they entered, stood the two china jars, and the one had a green rim and the other had a blue one. The geraniums growing in the common red earthenware pots that the china jars held were luxuriant and beautiful. That which stood out of the green-rimmed vase had white blossoms; the other, scarlet.

"It was the blue-rimmed one she told me to look in," observed Frank, as he stood over the two. "Now for it."

He lifted the earthenware pot from the blue-rimmed vase. There was nothing beneath it, except a little damp mould.

"Nothing," he said, moving aside to let Alice peep in too, while he held up the red pot, and looked around it and beneath it, to make sure that nothing escaped him.

"Could she have meant you to look in the flower-pot itself?" asked Alice.

The question brought back to him the cold, hard voice of the woman, repeating her instructions, "beneath the flower." "I'm afraid she must have meant that," he said.

"These flowers were here before I came," Alice observed, as she watched him gently probing the mould with his finger.

A few minutes' experiment convinced him that it would be quite easy to turn the whole out without injuring the plant or breaking the pot. Alice looked round. She caught sight of an old newspaper, and quickly spread it on the ground, in front of the table. Frank held the pot and the plant poised lengthways in his two hands; he began to gently shake and draw it. Out it came at last, with a sudden jerk. A few tiny stones rattled down on the paper; something else also fell with a heavy thud. It was a sealed envelope, thick and white.

Alice stretched out her hands, and silently took the pot and the plant from Frank. She saw how pale his face had grown.

He picked up the packet. It had no superscription; but when he turned it over he saw that it had been sealed with his father's ring—the red stone ring which had dropped at his feet that morning at Daylight Villa, and which he now wore on his hand.

In a few hasty words he strove to convey to Alice some of the significance of this; but she hardly understood. She could gather at least that the woman had professed to deliver messages from his dead father, and that first of all the ring, and now this sealed packet, had been brought forward to ratify their truth. It was sufficient to startle and shock her.

"But you don't believe it?" she said. "Believe, I mean, that there can be in it anything supernatural?"

"No," answered Frank; "and yet——"

"Don't open it," she quickly interposed; "don't proceed any farther in the matter without taking such advice as you know your father would have liked to see you take."

"Whose advice can I seek?" he said, bewildered. "I cannot deal with this myself."

"Could you not ask advice from Mr. Connell?" suggested Alice, as she carefully restored the displaced plant to its pot.

"Yes, I think I must," rejoined Frank slowly. "Philip and he will come in together,

I suppose. Under the circumstances, I could not speak to my uncle without first explaining to Philip and getting his permission, as it were. Perhaps I have done too much without advice already. I went to the police."

"The police!" exclaimed Alice.

"I went to them upon quitting Daylight Villa, chiefly to ask them to keep an eye on this woman's movements, and, if possible, find out where she comes from, and what her connections are. I cannot deny, Miss Cleare, that she told me strange things, and drew stranger inferences from them. I wonder what can be in this envelope. It feels like money."

Alice Cleare touched it, and assented.

"I suppose," said Frank confidentially, "that you feel sure you make no mistake in thinking the figure you saw in the garden the night before last resembled the figure you saw in the lane at Ravenstoke?"

"I think they were the same."

"The woman alluded to the ghost to-day," said Frank. "But, in truth, we have enough mystery just now without ghosts. That

shriek here, which nobody owns to, and nobody can fathom—what do *you* think of that?"

"I try not to think about it," she answered cheerily. "There are so many things not to be understood or explained that it is easy to tolerate one more."

"But do you mean to say that you can keep from forming an opinion on these things?" asked Frank.

Alice shook her head.

"Thoughts will come, you know," she said. "You see, there is at once a mystery to begin with—where do thoughts come from? One cannot help having thoughts, and sometimes we have some which we would rather be without."

"But won't you tell me the thoughts you have about this matter?"

"My fancies are of no value. If I had convictions, that would be different. You should be welcome to them."

"Thank you heartily for that!" answered Frank. "You can't think how lonely I am—perhaps you can, though—perhaps that's why

I don't mind owning it to you. I'm simply feeling about in the dark, without hand to lead me or friend to guide me; and there may be something in the path, ugly and evil, for me to stumble over. You don't know how a hint from you might help me. I have things to contend with that you know nothing of."

Tears filled Alice's eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Raven, I wish you would not speak like this! Indeed I should like to help you; but how can I? How can I do what you ask? It would not be right. It seems to me it would be almost like beginning to try the practices of this woman."

"I feel more and more that you have something in your mind which you could tell me if you would," persisted Frank. "Cannot you feel it right to do so?"

Alice was crying now—those quiet, patient tears which Frank remembered at their first interview. He felt that his perplexities might be making him selfish and harsh.

"Forgive me," he said gently; "I did not mean to oppress you with my burdens. I do

not ask you to do what you think wrong. You would not do it, I know, neither would I ask it."

"If a thing is right to be done," sighed Alice, "there must be a right way to do it. I should like to say something to you. This is nothing that I fancy," she went on, "it is only that I should like to ask you always to remember that our true value lies in ourselves, and in what we make of life; and that we do risk our souls to gain the world when we turn aside from the path that we feel to be right and true, because it is not pleasant or easy. And oh, be very kind and pitiful," she continued, as an after-thought, "for if we are injured, those who injure us have injured themselves more; rely upon that. And whatever we have to let go, we need never be without God and something to do for Him."

"Thank you," said Frank. "*You* have found the right way to do the right thing." He did not exactly own it to himself then, but from that moment he felt the witch's story might be true: and also, that even so it was

bearable. He held out his hand, keeping the mysterious packet in the other.

"Tell me that I need never be without one friend," he said, pleadingly.

She took his hand in her firm, soft clasp, and held it there. Then, without a word, she went away, leaving Frank Raven gazing after her, his thoughts busy.

"When the ghosts come," he whispered to himself, "surely the angels are not far off."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SEALED PACKET.

WHEN the visiting party returned, Frank contrived to speak to Philip apart. And Philip was so much impressed by this first whisper as to hasten to secure themselves from interruption.

He followed Frank's narrative with an attentive interest almost as masterly as that which the detectives had shown. Frank did not tell him everything, but he was candid in his concealment, openly avowing that he did not communicate what secret the woman had told him, but only that she had been utterly wrong in declaring that he knew it already.

"I hope you don't think I did wrong in speaking to the police," cried Frank. "You see, the slightest delay might have spoiled all by enabling the woman to get clear off."

"Wrong?" echoed Philip, "my dear fellow, you did quite right, and I am uncommonly glad you acted promptly, without waiting to consult me or anybody else. From what you state, this woman knows a great deal too much, and we must find out whence she derives her sources of information, and, if possible, the ends she has in view. The whole affair, as connected with this woman, is rather strange," he added, after a pause. "Why Louisa should be so nervous and excitable I cannot quite understand."

"If I speak to your father, may it not get her into trouble?"

"I'll take care of that," Philip answered. "The blame of the expedition shall lie between myself and Miss Evelyn Agate—who deserves the whole. It was she who in her crafty way pushed it on. And I will tell him—and it's the truth—that Louisa has had a better caution against such folly in the

future than in any lecture he could give her. Allow me to take another look at that ring, Frank?"

Frank drew it from his finger, and put it into Philip's hand. He examined it narrowly—even to the hall-mark on the metal.

He shook his head as he returned it.

"I thought it might be a cleverly got-up duplicate," he said; "but I see it is a genuine article. I suppose it is really your father's ring?"

"Here's a proof of it: the letter E, rudely engraved inside. You have heard of the old Squire Eldred: the ring belonged to him, and that stands for the initial letter of his name. There is no mistake, Philip, about its being the real ring."

"How on earth, then, did the woman become possessed of it?"

"That is one of the most puzzling of all the questions. You see I must disclose all this to your father."

Philip nodded.

"Yes, I think I ought to. For one thing—

there is this packet. I do not wish to open it, except in Mr. Connell's presence. You seem to be testing its weight, Philip, as though you thought it contained gold."

"I must say it's heavy enough for it."

Frank sauntered to the window, and looked out. As he stood so, his back to Philip, he ran on, in a careless tone:

"I ought to tell you also that I mentioned the matter to Miss Cleare—that I had been to see the 'Oriental Mystery.' You were not in, you see, Philip, and she was the only one about; and I was impatient to see whether there was anything in the flower-pot or not. She kindly went in with me, and saw me find it. I have told her just what I have told you, Philip."

Philip whistled softly.

"Did you tell her that we had seen the woman first at the Cave?"

"No," said Frank, "she told me, so to say. She had felt sure you three went."

"Miss Cleare does not waste any love on Evelyn Agate."

"What do you mean by that?" asked

Frank, nettled. "Miss Cleare is above petty antipathies, so it seems to me."

Philip laughed in his critical, aggravating way.

"If Miss Cleare did not dislike Evelyn Agate, she would not be Miss Cleare," he said, oracularly.

"Philip, I cannot understand one thing—your bad opinion of Evelyn Agate. If you hold it, why are you so friendly with her? Why, you flatter her up like anything!"

"I know that, my good friend. I should lead but a lonely life if I did not maintain pleasant terms with any people except those of whom I hold a high opinion."

"Don't you like her?"

"Do you?"

"Look here, Philip. Do you believe Evelyn Agate to be a designing woman?"

Philip threw a quick glance at Frank Raven. He had keen perceptive faculties. Was it quite unlikely that this strange girl, with her tawny brown hair, her uncommunicative eyes and her missing antecedents, had set a seemingly supernatural machinery in

motion to secure for herself some safe position at Ravenscourt? In short, was Miss Evelyn setting her matrimonial cap at Frank under the rose? Or—egad, thought Philip, and this is the most likely—at Frank's elder brother, the reigning squire? In that case, the accurate details of the witch's knowledge—nay, the mystery of the ring itself—became no longer mysterious.

"The sooner you see my father, the better, Frank," he said aloud. "He is at leisure now, I think. I will just reassure Louisa by telling her the police have taken the woman in hand; and then I'll go to him and pave the way for you."

"You are a good fellow to say that, Philip, for you know that will make it pleasanter for me."

Frank remained where he was—in Philip's bedroom. He tried to occupy himself with one of the quarterly journals lying about. But it would not do. Waiting and waiting, he thought Philip never would come back.

But that gentleman was doing his best to despatch his errands with his usual airy

brevity. He had not found Louisa's mind quite so easy to "reassure" as he had imagined. His declarations that the witch had made an utter mistake in the matter of Frank, and had talked to him unintelligible nonsense, did not seem to calm her.

She *would* go back to her own interview.

If this woman had no truth to tell anybody else, then it was but the stranger she should have had something so much like truth to tell her.

Philip listened to this, and listened to that, and leaped out of his bewilderment to the shrewd conclusion that his sister was thoroughly unhappy and unhinged, and that she had put forward the event of this woman and her mystifications, as a plausible cover for some far deeper and more secret cause of uneasiness.

"She must have fallen in love," thought Philip. "Can it be with that quiet Italian? —and is she jealous of that other young woman, Evelyn, and their communings together in his language? A good thing if *she* would take up with the man!" And then

Philip, giving no hint of his doubts, administered to his sister a sound lecture, intended as a tonic, and which might be good in any case.

With his father he knew he was on very different ground. The Rev. Mr. Connell had always been a strict disciplinarian, who had expected obedience and had generally got it. But he remembered and realized the altered condition of his grown-up children far more than they did themselves. Probably his old authority held the stronger, through his reticence in commanding now. He would be sure to express his displeasure at what they had now done, but he would be all the more ready to hold to them a helping hand.

Philip found his father in his study—"the library," as Mrs. Connell always called it. It was a very comfortable room, in regard to furniture. For one thing, the element of choice and selection had entered here more largely than in any of the other apartments. For, to own the truth, in bygone, struggling days, much second-hand furniture, from halls

and granges round, had found its way to the minister's house from many a rural sale. But when the stress of life's battle was over, and the minister's wife went to no more sales for what she wanted, but only for what she wished, it was odd what a good background the first homely appurtenances made for bits of old oak, quaint china, and even stained glass. If anything with an aristocratic aroma about it came in Mrs. Connell's way, there was no question as to its destination—straightway she carried it off to her husband's library. And so, the library grew into a pleasant, well-toned room, Louisa's sketches adorning the walls, with other more pretentious paintings.

Mr. Connell had only been at home an hour, yet he was already deep in his beloved studies. He looked up from the manuscript over which he was bending when his son entered, not a shade of annoyance appearing on his worn face. Years ago, he had fully realized the special trials of the student temperament and life, its temptations to selfish seclusion, to irritability against interruption,

to impatience with the common cares and vexations of existence, and had schooled himself to bear them bravely. Henceforth, whoever had wanted him, had always found him ungrudgingly ready.

Philip drew up his chair beside his father's, and at once secured his undivided attention by saying he was in a "bother," and had a story for his ear. Then he narrated it from the beginning, with as little of his own colouring and emphasis as possible, except that he dwelt strongly on Louisa's confusion and contrition for having gone, and on the impersonally kind motives which had at last induced Frank to visit the fortune-teller.

Mr. Connell heard him out with very few interruptions of question or remark. Like many ministers of religion, whose culture and devotion are equal to their opportunities, he had a wider range of experience than falls to the lot of men in other professions. He had seen many souls in extremity; he had explored the mazes of many a strange history. This had left him gentle and patient, and

prepared for unlikely things, both in fact and in feeling.

Philip left nothing untold that he himself knew about Frank's visit, the mysterious appearance of the ring, and the discovery of the packet in the drawing-room. He said Frank would be sure to feel somewhat flurried and nervous whilst he went over the story later. And, when it was concluded, Philip rose to summon young Raven.

The minister rose too, and put his hand on his son's arm.

"I have not said one word of blame to you yet," he remarked, in his quietly impressive manner. "Those who stir dangerous water which they have been already warned against, need not be reminded of their mistake. I have no right to censure you. You know my opinions, Philip. But I fear lest you young people may think it is well you did what you did, as by that means you unearthed a plot of some kind which——"

"It is well it is unearthed, father."

"Yes; but it might possibly have been unearthed another way. At present it seems

to me, Philip, that you have simply followed the bait that was laid to lead you to the trap, whether or not you have yet fallen in."

"Oh yes, yes," said Philip ruefully. "I see plainly enough we have just been following somebody's lead, and finding out the trumps in their hand by letting them take our tricks. Let me call Frank, sir. He is not the real offender, at any rate."

"No, probably he is only the victim," answered the minister drily.

It was an immense relief to Frank to find his uncle so well prepared for the story he had to tell. He repeated it in haste, anxious to pass on to the secret portion he had hitherto kept to himself: which must now be told and got over. The bare repetition of it seemed to him dishonouring to his dead father and to Mrs. Raven.

"That was not all, sir," he went on, after confirming in detail what Philip had stated. "The woman said she could tell me a secret which I knew: but which, in fact, I had never yet known or heard. She said—she said——"

He stopped from emotion. Perhaps the half-expectant, half-amused smile on Philip's face served to restore his equanimity.

"Of course it was not true—but she told me I was the child of neither my father nor my mother."

The minister looked at him with a start. And evidently two or three thoughts or memories chased each other through his mind.

"Impossible," he said, shortly. "You are a Raven to the backbone, Frank. Not only do many a tone and gesture remind me of my brother-in-law, but you are really oddly like some of the old family portraits—my wife has mentioned one in particular. She noticed the resemblance the moment she saw you."

"Of course it was absurd," said Frank hurriedly, with a choking sensation in his breast. "But, backed up by the descriptions she gave, and above all by that ring, it naturally made an impression on me."

"Naturally," said the minister; "but I

think, Frank, you need have no fear on that score. And now, shall we proceed to open this packet ?"

He did not attempt to take it from Frank's hand, which he saw trembled in touching it. Frank pointed silently to the impression on the seal before he broke it, then at his ring. He carefully lifted out the contents upon the table.

There were three small tube-like enclosures, twisted up in silver paper. And each tube was composed of coins. They were golden coins—sovereigns ; and there were fifty of them.

But while Mr. Connell peered at them with short-sighted doubtfulness, Frank caught sight of something still in the envelope. It was a small slip of paper, with some words upon it. They almost took the breath from him, the handwriting was so like his father's —and their purport made the colour rush to his face and then suddenly leave it. He thrust the paper hastily into his pocket, and Mr. Connell at least had never seen it or his action.

"It is very strange," mused the minister. "Philip, what do you think of it?"

"I can't tell what to think just yet, sir. Wish somebody would forward me a few rouleaus of the same sort."

"The sooner this is investigated the better," said Mr. Connell. "I will myself accompany you both now to the police office. There must be some deep plot laid; and somebody evidently has much to gain by its success."

They went out together, saying nothing of where they were going. The way to the station lay chiefly through dark and lonely streets: but Frank felt as if none could be too dark or too lonely to be haunted by a spy or a conspirator.

All three gentlemen sent in their cards, and they were not kept waiting a moment. The taller and more communicative detective, Mr. Jones, came immediately. He greeted the well-known minister with cordial respect, but showed himself quite prepared to talk about the weather until the real object of their visit was led up to by Frank.

"Well, I have news; and I have none," answered Mr. Jones genially. "The woman did not go away by the train. But she is gone. From all we can gather, she must have left Daylight Villa almost before you reached this place here in the morning."

"And can nothing more be done," asked Frank, almost irritably, with a sudden recollection of much that he had heard about the incompetency of the police.

"Ah," said Mr. Jones, quite graciously, "we are doing our very best. The person you saw here this morning, Cran, has taken it in hand himself. *He* will not fail if there's a chance of succeeding."

"And has she left no clue whatever behind her?" questioned Philip, speaking for the first time.

"None," said the detective. "In fact, the people of the house did not know she had gone until our man inquired for her. At least, they said so, and we have every reason to believe they spoke the truth. They asked him indoors quite readily, and hunted through the house for the woman. Her dinner was

being cooked. Then they made angry lamentations over her running off without paying, and it was our man himself who found a paper on the mantelshelf in the parlour with cash in it, which the landlady said was quite sufficient to cover her debt."

"Plenty of money, seemingly," murmured Mr. Connell.

"One would hardly expect the woman to have a conscience about such matters," remarked Philip.

Mr. Jones shook his head.

"It may not be conscience," he observed. "It may be to reduce the number of people interested in discovering her."

"Ah, that's it," said Philip. "But had she not any luggage—anything belonging to her?"

"Yes, she had. She had a heavy portmanteau which they said was quite a tight fit on the narrow staircase, and they could not understand one person's getting it down without making any sound. The servant-girl was prepared to swear that it was standing safe in the bedroom when she made the bed this

morning. Certainly it is not there now, or anywhere in the house, for they gave us every facility for search. They say the strongest man could not have carried it far, unaided."

"Then some vehicle must have been hired!" exclaimed Frank, rising in his eagerness.

"Gently, sir," said the detective. "That was our natural conclusion, too: but we find that no licensed vehicle in this town has been hired for any such purpose to-day. Inquiries are now being made among carmen, porters, and others. In the meantime, it is our Mr. Cran's inference that the portmanteau was removed before to-day."

"And therefore that the servant is in the conspiracy?" suggested Philip.

"Not necessarily, sir. She may say she saw the portmanteau this morning, and may believe it to be the truth. She had seen the portmanteau, and *she expected to see it.* It is the hardest matter to get absolute accuracy about things which custom has made mechanical. Can you be sure you put your umbrella in the stand this morning? If you

found it in the corner of your bedroom instead, could you swear you had not put it there?"

They all admitted the difficulty.

"We imagine that some preparation was made for this apparently sudden departure," resumed Mr. Jones. "You see we are obliged to lay down certain lines of theory to help us to work at all." He seemed to await a question. Philip put it.

"Do you mean that you think this woman would have left Coltburn all the same had Mr. Frank Raven not visited her?"

The detective bowed.

"We do," he said. "We have a certain reason—a slender one perhaps—for thinking so."

He drew towards him a small iron case which lay on the table, and unlocked it with a key hanging to his watch-chain. From it he took a card whereon a few pieces of torn and crumpled paper were pasted together, with small irregular gaps between them. They seemed like the remains of the back of an envelope, with part of a superscription.

He held it towards Frank, who read from the jagged fragments.

"Fr— Ra—n, Esq.,
"At Rev. J. —nell's,
"Roman R—,
"Coltburn."

Frank felt his face flush again. For this writing had the same ghastly resemblance to his father's hand which the enclosure in the packet bore.

"Have you ever seen that writing before?" asked the detective, with an easy manner.

"Yes—I think so," Frank stammered, conscious that Mr. Jones was keenly watching him.

"Do you remember where you saw it, sir?"

"Yes, indeed. I did not know whose it was," curtly added Frank, as if he wished the subject to be dropped.

"Of course it is at your own option to answer questions or not, sir," returned Mr. Jones; "but if you want us really to serve you, you cannot give us too much confidence.

Things which may seem unimportant in your eyes may be most valuable clues in ours. By the way, you said, I think, that you had some inquiry to follow out in this gentleman's house?"

"Yes," admitted Frank; adding with a great effort: "And that was how I saw this handwriting."

And then he narrated the verbal instructions he had received from the woman concerning the hidden packet, its finding, and its contents. "There was a scrap of paper put in with the gold," he concluded, "bearing a word or two upon it."

But what those words were, he still did not say. Mr. Connell glanced at him anxiously, but hinted no reproach about this detail of the enclosed paper having been withheld from him.

The detective seemed to understand that Frank's candour would end here. "These torn fragments confirm our theory," he said cheerfully. "It is, that if you had not paid your visit, you would have received a letter in this directed envelope. The servant girl

says that before you came this morning, Madame had been sitting in her bedroom, writing, for a long time. The girl had gone in and out, hoping to disturb her, as she wanted to be about her usual domestic duties there. But Madame took no notice, and the girl thought what a long letter it must be. When she announced your coming, Madame was still at the desk, and she then crumpled up a lot of paper and thrust it into her pocket. While you were there, the girl took the opportunity of sweeping out the room and found these pieces on the floor ; as if, in Madame's hurry, they had just missed her pocket-hole. Seeing they were only torn scraps, she swept them into the dust-pan, which, fortunately, had not been emptied into the dust-bin when our man put in his appearance."

"Then you think she was writing a letter to my nephew," observed Mr. Connell.

"Probably she was, sir," replied the detective, with the deferential manner he always used towards the minister. "We believe it would have contained whatever she has told

him, would have given instructions about this packet, and possibly some other feat of jugglery would have been performed over the ring. I confess that the large sum of money in the packet puzzles me more than any amount of mystery. From the little evidence we can as yet gather, she seems to have been, in a general way, but an ordinary swindling fortune-teller. In fact it is this shabby conclusion about her, and our suspicion that she must have come unlawfully into possession of the ring, which enables us to take up the inquiry at all. You, Mr. Raven, may know of better grounds, but we cannot act upon them officially until they become public grounds: that is, public to us. Many matters, grievously inconvenient and distressing, occur in private life of which we can take no cognizance whatever."

"Frank," said the minister, "did you tell Mr. Jones of the night-alarm we had in my house?"

"I did not see any necessity for doing that, sir. It was not my affair, either," he added, with a glance at Philip.

"It was nothing—nothing at all," said Philip. "A shadow and a fancy."

"Then there can be no harm in speaking of it," pursued his father, turning to the deeply-interested officer. "This packet must have come into my house by some means, Mr. Jones; there can be no doubt of that. And only two nights ago we were certainly threatened with some nocturnal molestation."

And Mr. Connell told the story down to the smallest detail of circumstance.

"I am glad you have told me this, sir," spoke the detective, who had been busy with his note-book. "I suppose there is no person in your own house of whom you can have any suspicion? The servants are honest and trustworthy?"

"Quite so. One has been with us twenty years. The other is a simple, respectable young girl."

"H'm," said the detective, still writing. "Well, we will do our best."

"If this portmanteau was taken away yesterday," Frank cried, speaking out without

any preface, after the manner of those greatly wrapt in their own reflections, "that only shifts the question a little back. If she could not have carried it away herself to-day, she could not have carried it yesterday."

"Ah, we are making inquiries as to that, too," answered Mr. Jones. "But these things take a little time. You may rely, gentlemen, on our leaving no point unnoticed—or unexamined."

And so, after a little more discussion, the interview ended.

Frank's thoughts were busy. If that good man, his uncle, was to help and advise, ought he not to know all? Little as Mr. Connell had said, Frank somehow had learned to put faith in him.

"Uncle," he said, in a low voice, as the three went together into the library, before joining the evening circle, "when I was talking with the detective just now, I felt sorry that I had not told you about the paper which was enclosed with the gold."

Mr. Connell turned towards him with a faint flush on his wan cheeks. He was keenly

sensitive, as introspective scholars often are. "Never mind, my boy," he said kindly. "I remember that youth often has strange and unaccountable silences."

Frank went on in so low a voice, that Philip could not catch his words. "When that woman told me what you know, she added some advice. The paper I got this evening bore on that."

He handed it to Mr. Connell. The lamp was burning very low, and the minister's spectacles were not at hand. He drew the dim light towards him and held the paper behind it.

Its texture was thin and coarse. Philip, at the other side of the table, looked up, and saw through it the scrawling caligraphy. There were seven words. Of course, he saw them backwards and so could not read them, except the two last: he was sure he was not mistaken in those.

The minister gave a kind of groan, and returned the paper to Frank. "You don't know the writing?" he said. "It looks somehow familiar to me."

"It is like my father's," whispered Frank. "Like his; yet different—a kind of copy."

"Well, well," said Mr. Connell. "Of course, you set no value on this?"

"Certainly not," answered Frank, with that tone of contempt which is far less easily assumed than one of indignation.

"That's right," observed the minister. "But we must not forget that she—the subject of this message—may be as innocent and unconscious as any of us. No breath of this thing should be allowed to reach her."

Frank suddenly stood so stock-still that his uncle turned and gazed at him. A sudden memory called out by Mr. Connell's words had darted through the clouds of bewilderment within him, and had lit up a long chain of circumstances with new significance.

CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. RAVEN'S WISHES.

THE next morning found no change in Mrs. Raven's determination to return at once to Ravenscourt. Mrs. Connell had exhausted reason in pleading with her to remain, and felt that she had no fresh inducements to hold forth. It was easy to declare that Mrs. Raven was wrong in feeling that she, a sick and nervous invalid, was an undesirable guest, and to urge that duty and affection made any such burdens light: but it was not easy to combat her arguments that such a sufferer was best at home—that even familiar furniture and faces might have a soothing effect on wrung and shattered nerves.

"I shall not be better at Ravenscourt, probably," said Mrs. Raven to them, "and at least I shall feel nearer to Raven church-vaults."

She spoke bitterly: and not with any natural yearning for reunion with the departed. It was only the grave's darkness and silence that she longed for: and she checked herself the moment the words were uttered.

Such speeches were no fashion of hers. If she got into the habit of uttering her thoughts, what might she not say next? She felt that the kind homeliness of the Connell household was a dangerous relaxation. Bitter Charity Hale would brace her nerves. She would not be weak before her!

"Shall you accompany your mother to Raven?" asked Mr. Connell, very quietly addressing Frank, as the rest of the family moved from the breakfast-table, and left the uncle and nephew sitting there alone, quite contrary to the minister's usual habit, for he was generally the first to rise from meals.

Frank looked up from the newspaper,

which he was bending over, but not reading. There was a great comfort in the reflection that one, like the good minister, who had found so clear a track of duty for himself in life, and whose brow was lined with thought for others, while his eyes were soft and clear with God's inward light, knew at least at what a strange turning he, Frank, had found himself, and that therefore he might confide to him many a wild fancy and memory which had kept him sleepless all that night.

"I ought to do so," replied Frank in a troubled voice. "But how can I, sir? How can I go back to Raven without one word of certainty as to what that woman said?"

"But I thought we knew there was no truth in what she said." Mr. Connell looked straight at Frank as he made the remark, and there may have been a question in his tone and a little mild expostulation, but there was certainly a world of patient tenderness.

"Yes—but——" and Frank's eyes again nervously sought the printed sheet before him. "I must say something, uncle, as we are upon this subject. Though you probably

know that Miss Evelyn Agate is a foundling, you may not know that the presumed day of her birth is the same as mine. I quite forgot it myself all along until I was showing you that scrap of paper last night."

"When and how did you first learn that fact, Frank?" quietly asked Mr. Connell, who had risen from his seat and was slowly pacing the room.

"When I first saw *her*. It was at the house of Miss Agate, whom she calls 'aunt.' Philip took me there; he knew them. The date had just appeared, with the name of a firm of lawyers, in the newspapers at that time, and Miss Agate thought it worth while to make some inquiries into the matter. First Philip went to them for her, and then the two ladies went themselves."

"And what was the result?" asked Mr. Connell.

"Nothing," replied Frank. "I think Evelyn Agate was very much distressed that it was so. She seemed to have expected all sorts of important revelations."

"Did the coincidence strike you in the

least at the time?" asked Mr. Connell. "Do you recollect whether you made any remark about it?"

Frank shook his head. "I can scarcely remember," he replied; "probably I mentioned the fact. You see, it scarcely seemed a coincidence then—rather a mere accident."

"I understand—I understand," said Mr. Connell. "Certainly a coincidence means more than a simultaneous occurrence of events. It involves events in some way related to each other. Of course, plenty of children must have been born on that same day."

"I had not then the faintest idea that there had been—anything wrong—about my birthday," said Frank, who found that it is not easy to give clear expression to a confused state of mind.

His uncle paused in his walking to and fro.

"You mean you had not received such a suggestion as you received yesterday?"

"Yes, sir," stammered Frank. "And now that it has been made, I can't help

feeling that, if true, it might shed light on some matters which have long troubled me."

"You must not allow yourself to think of it as true," said the minister decidedly. "Even a much better originated suggestion could be regarded only as on its trial. By making a random statement, and seeking for circumstantial evidence in its favour, one could prove almost anything. One should work the other way, through the facts, up to a statement. But let me say once for all, Frank, that you are of the Ravens' blood seems to me indisputable. I asked your aunt last night, in a casual way, which ancestor she said you resembled; and she instantly answered that you are like many of the family pictures, but bear the most striking resemblance to one Gilbert Raven, whose portrait hangs over the fireplace in the Court dining-room."

"I am not in the least like Leonard," said Frank. "Everybody always remarked that."

"I have been told that Leonard favours

your mother's people entirely," observed Mr. Connell.

There was a short silence. Frank, who was growing more and more disposed to think that truth must be at the bottom of the "Oriental Mystery's" assertions, recollected that she had declared him to be the child neither of his mother nor his father. Mr. Connell chanced to be going over his own thoughts on the same part of the subject.

"There was my father's peculiar will!" Frank ventured to whisper, without adding one word to indicate how he connected it with the matter in hand.

"I have thought of that," said Mr. Connell. "You are wondering whether some doubt about your birth had entered his mind and prompted it. I cannot think so. There does not seem to have been the faintest trace of such a doubt; and if there had been, it would hardly have led him to do as he did. Remember, he left your mother all he could, and made you her sole heir. Though I know it is not the way of the world, I myself

have never been able to see how anyone could imagine that he wronged you by leaving you dependent in the meantime on the justice and mercy of an affectionate parent!"

If Frank had not been drawn to Mr. Connell before, that speech would have bound him to him for ever. Nothing helps us so much as to hear from other lips the assurances we have often tried to give ourselves. But the words brought another reflection. If Mr. and Mrs. Raven had been somehow deceived about the child in their cradle, might it not have been a secret whisper of Nature which had made Mrs. Raven always look so coldly and strangely on him? At that thought, Frank's generous heart leaped up. "My mother might like me better if she found out that I had no claim on more affection than she can give me," he thought. And now he felt that he might speak out, since it would no longer impute to Mrs. Raven any absence of natural motherly feelings, but might almost vindicate the fine keenness of her maternal instinct.

So to Mr. Connell he said, in a low, hurried voice:

"I am trusting you with everything, uncle; I am saying things which I never thought to have spoken. It is that I have often thought my mother did not seem to care for me. She was always very good, and did every duty, and gave me the best advice, and all that, but nothing seemed to come quite naturally. She never forgot me, but I think she had always to remember me."

Mr. Connell, who had resumed his walk, again stood quite still.

"But until you heard this suggestion, I don't suppose you laid much stress on these things," he said. "That is the evil such words do."

Frank shook his head.

"I remember the servants used to tell me that Leonard was mamma's favourite. When I was naughty, they would say, 'And no wonder;' and when I was in their favour, they made it an occasion for petting and pity. It was ever the same tune."

"Most mothers have a preference among

their children," said Mr. Connell. "Your elder brother was, I believe, a sickly child, and has always remained delicate. Our Percy had a dangerous illness in infancy, which has made him his mother's darling ever since. Such preferences generally follow infirmity or inferiority, physical, mental, or moral. It is a blessed provision of nature to secure one friend to those least likely to win many."

Frank spoke again with a great effort.

"I must say," he said, "it was the full realization of my mother's feeling towards me which made me leave Ravenscourt, and throw myself on Philip's hospitality in London."

Mr. Connell was once more pacing to and fro. He made a half-deprecating wave of his hand, and said, "Is it so? is it so?" He would not trust himself to any more definite response. Philip had certainly told his father very little about Frank and his London visit, but, by many a significant glance and emphasis —especially strong after Mrs. Raven had notified her intention of coming to Coltburn

—he had managed to convey something of the real state of matters. Until he heard Frank's words now, the minister had thought his son's opinions were probably exaggerated: he often suspected Philip of a tendency to sensationalism — a common weakness in young people who have just found out that there are strange things in the world, and scarcely know where they may be encountered.

Frank felt some tender prickings. He thought of the kind letters from Mrs. Raven which had reached him in London—of her warmer, almost solicitous manner towards him since they had met here. And though Leonard had always been "mamma's favourite" he had certainly never shown himself a very attentive and devoted son. How terrible it would be if, in the yearnings of her widowhood, her heart had stretched itself toward the other child of the house, only to find that he was not the child of her flesh and blood! It might be a blow which would alienate her from him for ever, and put it out of his power to make her life a little less dull and arid than

it had always, somehow, seemed to him to be. He hastened to remove any harsh impression he might have conveyed to Mr. Connell's mind.

"I mean that I felt sure my mother thought I should be better away from home," he explained. "I think she saw I ought to know something of the realities of life. I should have been brought up to a profession, as I believe was always her wish——"

"But not your father's?"

"I suppose not. I had a sort of general impression that arrangements would be made to buy a small estate for me, which would at once secure me occupation in life, as well as a maintenance. That seemed to be the home intentions—I cannot say I really thought much about it. It is odd how little of definite thought one gives to this kind of thing beforehand."

"Quite natural, at your age," observed Mr. Connell. "You see, your father's death occurred at a critical point of your existence. Had he lived five years longer, he would no doubt have seen the necessity of settling

matters very differently. Not that there is any real harm done, Frank : perhaps quite the reverse. You will have the satisfaction of making some way for yourself in life before you enter upon your inheritance."

"I shall first of all have to make sure that I have a right to any inheritance," spoke Frank. "If I have reason to think I am not my father's son, I will never touch a bequest—that was left by him in the belief that I was his."

Mr. Connell paused beside his nephew, and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"My dear boy," he exhorted, "your immediate duty is to keep your mind from dwelling on this matter ; at least, until we hear what information the police can get for us. The faintest clue as to who this woman is, where she comes from, and under what influence she works, might explain all. In the meantime it is your direct duty to act as far as you can as you would have acted if this wretched rumour had never reached you."

"What !—even to go to Ravenscourt ?" asked Frank in dismay. "Before this I feel

almost sure I should have accompanied my mother home; but now—how can I—how can I?"

"I am by no means sure that your presence there might not be highly desirable," mused the minister. "And whatever we ought to do, Frank, we can do. Remember that. Those are the happiest people who never forget it."

Frank thought of Alice Cleare, and the simple faith and courage with which she restrained even grief and terror. "If you think it is right, sir," he faltered.

The elder man was touched by this quick docility. Why should he bind a hard burden on the lad, which perhaps it was not meet that he should bear? The minister's mind had grown alert in threading the ins and outs of life for other people's guidance, and he saw a way which might lead out of the difficulty. Perhaps, though certainly he did not own this to himself, he also saw that through this way a ray of light might fall, which might reveal something or guide somewhere.

"Let your mother herself decide for you,

Frank," he said kindly. "Has she expressed any wish that you should accompany her home?"

"I fancied she thought I would do so when she first came here," answered Frank; "but since she has been ill she has not said a word on the subject."

"Go and sit with her alone," advised Mr. Connell. "Preparations for her departure are almost made, I understand: I saw one corded portmanteau in the corridor this morning. If she does not open the subject, ask her at once whether she would prefer you to accompany her home. I have very little doubt as to her answer."

Neither had Frank. But he certainly felt it would be easier to go to Raven, if his mother specially requested it, than if any overture came from him.

"You have never asked me what became of the gold in the packet found in our vase," said Mr. Connell, with a grave smile. "I hope you do not think I regard it as treasure-trove, and intend to exercise manorial rights."

"I—I really forgot all about it this morning," Frank answered, looking up. "Who it was that sent it, and why it should have been sent, and to me, I cannot in the least degree imagine. Of course I shall never touch it."

"Certainly not," assented Mr. Connell, producing it from his pocket in the identical papers in which it had been folded. "I took charge of it, and I purpose, with your consent, to seal it up, write outside it, 'In trust for Frank Raven,' and then stow it away in my strong box. It may be well to keep the very coins which were sent, and the paper they came in."

"Yes, uncle. I cannot tell you how thankful I am to have your advice and countenance just now."

"Not more thankful than I am if I can be serviceable to you," said Mr. Connell warmly. And he blamed himself that he could not help feeling that it was a strange Nemesis which had opened for him the skeleton closet of these Ravens, who had so loftily repudiated his entrance into their circle. What right

had he to think of such things at this juncture? the good man asked himself, with severe self-judgment.

"Frank," he resumed, "is there any person outside your own family circle at the Court, on whom you could rely in any emergency that might call for tact and trustworthiness? We who have lived long in the world, generally learn to know where one or two such are to be found. But you young folks would do well to reflect beforehand where you would look for such.

"There is the Vicar," said Frank, "the Rev. Jasper Toynbee. He was my father's confidential friend—in general," he added, qualifying his statement as he remembered that the Vicar had not been admitted to the Squire's confidence concerning his will. "Mr. Toynbee has always been very kind to me."

"Toynbee—Toynbee," mused Mr. Connell. "I don't remember that name in the days when I knew something of your neighbourhood."

"He was not there then," Frank answered.

"He became vicar about two years before I was born."

Mr. Connell said nothing. But he made a mental note that this Rev. Jasper Toynbee was one person who might, on a future occasion, give some information as to the people and circumstances surrounding that fateful 4th of September.

"I suppose I had better go to my mother at once," observed Frank.

"Do so," said his uncle, drawing the newspaper to his side of the table.

Frank met Evelyn on the staircase, coming down from his mother's chamber. She had breakfasted there with Mrs. Raven, and so apparently had had no opportunity for uninterrupted perusal of her morning's letters. For she had one open in her hand, and was smiling as she glanced through it. She held it down by her side as she greeted Frank. Between his comings out and in, and her attendance on the invalid, the two had not seen each other since all Frank's adventures of the previous day.

Strange it is how the sudden sight of a

beaming familiar face scatters the shadows and suspicions which may have gathered round our thought of it, during its absence! Common daylight and the stir of ordinary life are generally fatal to morbid fancies. For one moment Frank forgot that Evelyn had been seeming to stand in any other light than that of a pleasant acquaintance—his mother's kindly companion. He saw her again as he had seen her the first time in her adopted aunt's quaint home in London.

"Have you heard from Miss Agate?" he asked. "She ought to be in the country in this beautiful weather."

"She never leaves home, you know," answered Evelyn.

Frank felt as if he had been cruel.

"I hope she is quite well."

"I hope so, too," said Evelyn, with a light laugh. "I have not heard from her."

And so they passed on their way, and Evelyn's image in Frank's mind returned to its dark corner. From whom had she received that letter? It was no part of her duty to tell him; he knew that well enough.

He had as little right to expect such frankness from her as from his cousin Louisa. But he felt that from Louisa he should have got it. And Evelyn had always taken special pains to convince everybody that there was no love affair in her life! And yet if there was really any secret to keep, how easily she could have thrown him off the scent, by the glib mention of "a friend," "an old school-fellow," "a mere business letter." Guileless Frank had yet to learn that the best deceivers tell the fewest lies.

Mrs. Raven, who had not brought her maid to Coltburn, was moving about, surrounded by luggage-labels, straps, and other paraphernalia of departure. It was the first time since her indisposition of the previous day, that Frank had seen her out of bed, and attired in her ordinary costume. He was struck by a singular change in her—a change not to be accounted for by a day or two's sickness, and that sickness not acute. She looked like one who has had a terrible shock. Frank remembered in his boyhood having seen a lady, of whom he was told a tale.

Going to awaken an only brother, from whom she had parted in anger the night before, she had found him in his bed dead. He had never forgotten that lady's face; he could understand the expression it wore. But why did his mother's remind him of it now? Suffering enough, she had had, it was true, but none of it was of the nature of shock. Could it be that the alarm in the night, falling upon strained nerves and a weakened constitution, had had all this effect?

She moved towards him feebly, and put up her face to his. He understood the gesture, and kissed her. It was no customary action between them. And Frank did it with a certain formal solemnity.

"Come and sit down beside me," she said. "I want to see a little of you before I go away."

"I would have been with you more yesterday, only that I was afraid I might disturb you," observed compunctious Frank.

"When one has an awful headache, anything disturbs one," she answered;

"but you don't disturb me now, at any rate."

Her eyes seemed searching his face, as if she expected to see something there that she did not find. The thought which had occurred to Leonard occurred also to Frank: Mrs. Raven was surely very much shaken by his father's death, and this was just beginning to tell on her.

"Do you really think you are fit to travel?" he asked tenderly.

"Quite," she said. "I think travelling does me good. I felt better while I was on my way to Coltburn than I had felt for a long while before. But I have been worse since I came here."

"You have been here so short a while, mother! You have not given the change a fair chance. I shall accompany you, of course," he added, finding she did not speak.

Before this white, strained face, all Frank's repugnance to the thought of home faded; nothing in the world was so real as this frail, breaking woman, whose love seemed reaching

out towards him just as he had prepared to go without it for ever.

"No," she said, quickly; "no, no. I will not shorten your visit here. I like to see you in this happy house, among these good, kind people."

"But my visit must be short, anyhow," answered Frank. "Philip returns to London in a day or two, and I shall not remain behind him."

"Go back to London with him, then," urged Mrs. Raven. "I am sure the little change has been good for you. There will be plenty of time for the Court by-and-by."

"Do you think I have improved, mother?" Frank asked, catching at a vague reason for her changed manner towards him.

"I hope we all improve," she said, a little primly. "But I feel you have had rather a dull life hitherto, even for a boy. And you are a young man now. You were always so different from Leonard. And now your father has gone, the Court must be terribly lonely for you."

"Not if you would like me to be there,

mother," returned Frank softly. The horror of the witch's story seemed melting away. Had not his own lurking consciousness of its horrible truth been based on the idea that Mrs. Raven's alienation might have been instinctive?

Something like a spasm passed over her pale face. "Of course, I like you to be there," she said. "But love is not selfish, Frank. I like you to be where I feel it is good for you to be."

She was her old didactic self as she spoke, and she spoke in her old chilling manner. Frank felt a painful doubt as to which was her true self—the strange pleasant change, or the sudden reaction.

"Go back to London," she continued, more genially, touching his arm with the tips of her thin fingers. "Go back, and write to me about all you do, and all you see. And do not forget to go often to Miss Agate's house."

Frank looked up at her. Her eyes did not meet his.

"I have heard so much of her from

Evelyn," Mrs. Raven went on, nervously. "I think she must be so very good a woman: and she has suffered a great deal! You have never seen her poor brother—have you?"

"Oh, no," answered Frank. "Even Miss Evelyn Agate has never seen him."

"So she tells me. His state of health is a terrible trial. Did you ever hear of any medical opinion about it?"

"No," replied Frank, rather wondering. His mother did not often manifest an interest in utter strangers. "But he is not considered insane now; he suffers only from the effects of the shock he received."

Mrs. Raven gave a slight shiver. "I cannot help thinking he must have allowed some secret trouble to prey upon his mind until it unhinged it."

"Probably," answered Frank. "But how did you hear so much about him, mother?"

"Oh, Miss Evelyn Agate has talked to me," answered Mrs. Raven quickly. "Poor man! Should you get to hear of anything that could serve him in any way, Frank—any little expense, you understand—let me

know of it. It is not much one can do for those thus stricken—but let us do it."

She rose. And Frank rose too. She took both his hands in hers.

"Good-bye, Frank—I will say it to you here—good-bye for the present. God bless you! And remember—remember always—that wherever I am, at Ravenscourt or anywhere else, there is a home for you."

She had yet a few whispered questions to put about money matters. But Frank had not exhausted his own store, and would take nothing from her.

Thus, almost as soon, so to say, as Mrs. Raven entered the house at Coltburn, she left it again, Evelyn Agate of course accompanying her. There was something in this sudden departure that the Connells, always straightforward and open in action themselves, could not understand.

"My belief is, she got such a scare the other night with that scream, that she's afraid to stay," spoke Percy, ready as usual with his opinion. "Thinks we keep ghosts in the house—or something as bad."

When they had left, Mrs. Connell was admitted to the secret of the young people's visit to the witch, and of the strange thing found in the drawing-room. And it turned out that she had very valuable testimony to give concerning the blue-rimmed flower-vase.

"The packet was not there the morning after our fright in the night; I can say so positively," affirmed Mrs. Connell. "But that this is certain, I might feel inclined to believe that the figure we saw on the lawn did somehow get into the house, and put the strange packet beneath the plant."

"And then fastened the bolt inside the window, after he went out," Philip reminded her, with a laugh.

His mother took no notice of this interruption.

"On the night of the scream—of course, I mean previous to it, when we were all still in the drawing-room—I had happened to strike my arm against the card-table, nearly threw it down in fact, and heard one of the red pots rattle as if it were broken. I looked, and saw that it was broken: Julia, it

seems, had done it that same morning when lifting it out to dust the vase. She told Minton of it, but there had been no time to say anything to me, engaged as I was with Mrs. Raven. The following morning, after breakfast, when you were all busy in the dining-room talking about the scream, I got a fresh pot from the garden, carried it to the drawing-room, and myself put the geranium into it, giving the broken pieces of the other pot to Julia to take away. Certainly the packet of gold was not there then."

"And you are sure it was the same flower-pot, Millicent—not the other?"

"I am sure it was the same in which you tell me that gold was found," Mrs. Connell replied to her husband's question. "It was the scarlet plant, and it was in the blue-rimmed vase. I did not touch the other."

"Pretty conclusive evidence, mother, I think," remarked Philip. "This you say was after breakfast on the morning following the fright. The windows were kept bolted that day——"

"I saw to that," interrupted his mother.

"I had been too much scared myself not to take care of the window fastenings."

"Just so, mother mine. Therefore, putting aside any idea of supernatural agency, as I presume we all do, it must be somebody living within the house who placed the packet where it was found."

The minister smiled.

"For a rising special pleader, Philip, your argument is rather a lame one. How do you know it was not placed there by a visitor?"

Philip lifted his eyebrows.

"Could a visitor be left alone long enough to take out a plant from a pot, mould and all, and put it in again, sir?"

Of course that was a question. Mr. Connell could not answer it. Alice Cleare, who was standing with them, spoke.

"Would not the fact of Mrs. Connell's having recently lifted the same flower and the mould out of one pot and put it into another, render the task more easy?"

"Undoubtedly it would," said Mrs. Connell. "And the mould was caked quite stiff

to the shape of the pot, so that with care it would not be disturbed, or crumble."

"Well now, what visitors had you that day?" asked the minister.

"Miss Beck and Miss Miranda for two," laughed Philip. "Can't say, though, that I should suspect those estimable gentlewomen of trying their hands at a conjuring trick."

Mrs. Connell laughed too.

"No, indeed. And we had scarcely any other visitors that day. Not one, I think, who was for a single instant in the drawing-room alone."

"Marco Learli came in, you know, when we were at dinner, mother, and you would not let me go to him," cried Percy.

"But Louisa went," said Mrs. Connell.

"As if Marco Learli would put a packet of gold in the flower-pot!" struck in Louisa, her colour heightening.

"I did not say he would," retorted Percy. "Don't fancy he has any too much gold for himself."

"Hush, children," interposed their mother. "Poor Marco Learli may, I am sure, be

exempt from suspicion. And so may every visitor—they were but few, I repeat—who called that day."

"Well, it seems we can make nothing of it ourselves, so we must carry this additional fact to the detectives," said the minister. "By the way, Frank," he added, turning to his nephew, "might it not be well if you wrote to question your brother Leonard about the ring?—when he lost it—if he knows—and where he had kept it?"

Frank had the ring on his finger, and before he answered he held out his hand and looked at it, as if he half thought it might be spirited back to its accustomed place at the Court.

"No," he said reflectively. "I will not be in a hurry. I think, uncle, I should not like to ask Leonard to keep anything secret from my mother—from Mrs. Raven. And we should not like a worry of this unaccountable sort to be told her as soon as she reaches home."

Philip Connell was quick enough to notice how Frank substituted the title "Mrs.

Raven" for the words "my mother." But the only impression it conveyed to him was, that the alienation between mother and son was steadily increasing.

"Perhaps you are right, Frank—looking at it from that point of view," said the minister.

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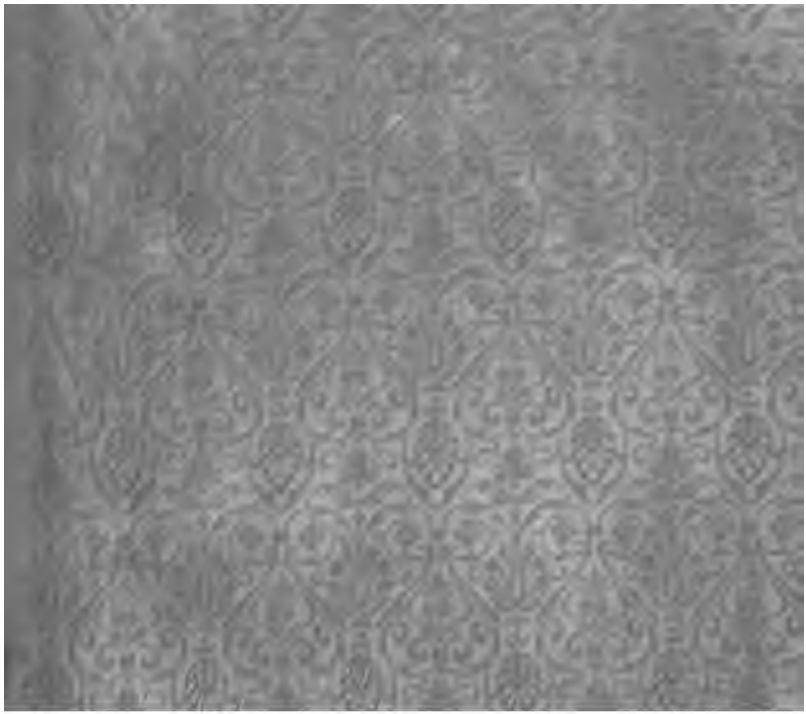
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